

Another World's Zombie Apocalypse Is Not My Problem!

Haru Yayari

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ANOTHER WORLD'S
ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE
IS NOT MY PROBLEM!



VOL. 2
BY Haru Yayari ILLUSTRATED BY Fuyuki

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Other Series Pt. 2

Another World's Zombie Apocalypse Is Not My Problem! Volume 2

Haru Yayari

Translation by Charis Messier

Illustration by Fuyuki

Title Design by KC Fabellon

Editing by Mercedes Clewis

Proofreading by A.M. Perrone

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contact@crossinfworld.com

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Published in the United States of America

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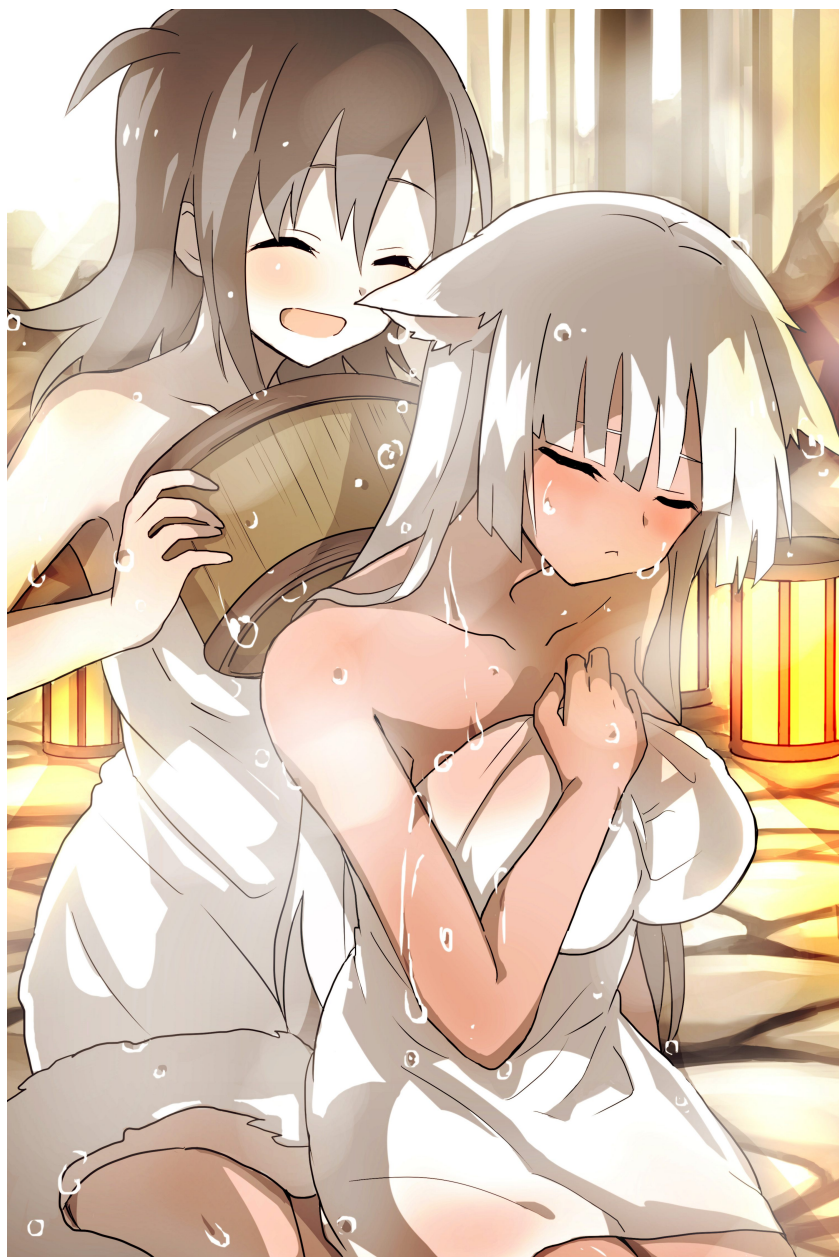
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First Digital Edition: November 2020

ISBN-13: 978-1-945341-44-1





◆Chapter 1: Zombies with Furry Ears and Tails?

DEAR Father and Mother,

Are you well? Knowing you two, you're still very much in love. How about that big brother of mine? Three months have passed since I disappeared—has he taken his college entrance exams yet? Actually, maybe it's best not to ask after him. He's always been weak to external expectations: the pressure just makes him nauseous. Just know that I'm cheering you on with limited expectations, Bro!

Oh, you want to know how I'm doing? Don't worry—I'm fine. Life is going well. Like, I'm getting *WAY* more exercise than I ever did back home. Cardio matters here. Yeah, it really does because if I don't run fast...I'll be eaten alive by zombies.



“GROAHHHHH!”

“NOOOOOOOOOO!”

Mizuha Kusunoki here. I'm currently running for my life from a Boneless Ham—no, that's not some sort of food on wheels. It's a fifteen-foot-tall zombie that's all muscle and protruding flesh. Obviously, it's rotting, and it reeks to high heaven! Get too close, and the stench will make your eyes water.

I bound away from death as fast as my feet will carry me, wondering what I did wrong in life to deserve this. About three months ago, I woke up in an apocalyptic world full of zombies. Just when I thought I was the last person alive, I found out I can purify zombies back to their original human state. So, long story short, I purified Grantz Kingdom—the nearest kingdom to me—and succeeded in capturing the crook who zombified the world.

Thus, I received the right to return to my comfy world by doing everything the wretched Goddess—who ARBITRARILY

summoned me without NOTICE or PERMISSION—wanted. But stupid me: I had some lingering attachment to this world and decided to stay.

That was about two months ago.

Part of the conditions for me sticking around is purifying the rest of the world, so my days since have been filled with going on purification expeditions with Grantz Kingdom's armies as the Priestess. And this time, I came to a large forest that occupies the western border of Grantz's territory...where I was immediately greeted by a Boneless Ham.

"Lady Mizuha!"

A young man rushes to my side with that booming voice. Golden hair tied back in a samurai hairstyle dances over his silver plate armor. This man who looks just like a fairy tale knight is Lex Irvine. He's the first zombie-turned-human I met in this world. He is also my personal knight in shining armor—*when he's not a zombie*.

"URAAAAAAAAAH!"

Lex thrusts his sword into the Boneless Ham's meaty side. Unfortunately, the hard flesh prevents the sword tip from piercing through, but it succeeds in directing the grotesque zombie's attention toward Lex.

"Now please, Lady Mizuha!"

"On it!" I respond as I slap the Boneless Ham's slimy back. I cringe as the putrid zombie stench and goo assaults my senses. It's the epitome of disgusting *every* time. Going through with the touch paid off though because its body is glowing brighter than a Christmas tree—evidence the purification was a success.

Puzzle piece-like seams emerge on its body, and from there, dozens of animals fall onto the ground as if emptying a zipped up bag. Boneless Hams—yes, there are more than one—seem to be a zombie type formed from combining a large number of zombie animals. Purifying it always has the same result. Interestingly enough, the animals inside tend to vary. This one was mostly made up of horses.

"I humbly apologize for my late arrival, Lady Mizuha."

"You made it just in time. Don't sweat it. Thanks, Lex." I sigh as I wipe the sweat from my brow. "Anyway, I honestly didn't expect to run into a Boneless Ham right away. Kinda miss the normos. Those I've gotten used to, it's the unique types I can't handle..."

"Their strength and abilities are on entirely different levels, after all. On the bright side, our domestic animals increase with every one we take down."

"Yeah, that's a great bonus, but definitely not worth the risk..."

Generally, we regain five to ten animals for every purified Boneless Ham. They tend to be the larger farm animals such as cows, deer, pigs, and horses. Thinking of the big picture, securing food and transportation is a huge plus, but as the person risking her life each time, I have my reservations. But I know I chose to stay behind and help—I try not to complain too much.

"Hey, speaking of animals, are all these horses foals?" I ask.

"No, I believe they are simply a shorter breed, m'lady."

The five fallen horses all have short legs. They remind me of the ponies from my world. They're so little and cute. I want to pet their thick manes, but it's viscerally impossible for me right now. Each of them is covered in thick pink mucus from purifying the Boneless Ham.

"BWEOW."

"Say, Lex, did you just moan?" I ask after hearing a weird noise.

"Do you believe me to be so strange that I *moan* for no reason? But, to answer your question, *no*, I do not make sounds like that."

"Really? I thought it might be something you do for fun."

"How much of a pervert do you think I am?!"

"BWEOW."

"There you go again."

"I-It's not me!" he protests. Obviously, I don't actually think it's Lex. Teasing him is just my feeble attempt at escaping reality. I raise my gaze to the source of the noise. I really wish I hadn't.

"Zombies are in the *trees*?!" I cry.

Countless zombies had taken to the trees. I don't know how long they have been up there, but they are clinging to the branches like koalas, watching us. It's a bizarre sight indeed. None of the normal zombies have been capable of climbing during the daytime before.

"Uh...is it just me or do they have furry ears and tails?"

Triangular ears stand erect and forward on their heads, and long, slender tails flick behind them. Their fur is scruffy and a sickly purple from the rot, making it hard to distinguish at first, but it

looks an awful lot like the cats from my world.

“Could they be—”

“You know what they are, Lex?”

“Yes, I do. They are beastmen of the Lucor Tribe who have lived off these woods as hunters for a great many years. I am fairly positive because of their distinct petite size.”

“Beastmen exist in this world?”

Zombies, goddesses, Dark Djinn—I’ve already faced so many crazy fantasy creatures that nothing fazes me anymore. I adapt frighteningly well.

“Do they not exist in yours, Lady Mizuha?”

“...A select few people like to dress like them,” I say with a dry laugh.

“I see. They must be trying to become more attuned with nature.”

Nah, I don’t think that’s it at all, I think but keep it to myself when there’s a sudden movement above.

“BWEEOOOW!”

“BWEEOOOOOW!”

“BWEEOOOOOOOW!”

The Lucor zombies let out a round of mewls and leap down from the trees. They land on all-fours, just like a beast. Then they begin circling me, Lex, and the Grantz soldiers.

“D-Don’t they seem a little too fast for daytime?!” I cry. Every normal human zombie I’d encountered moved slowly during the day. The Lucor zombies show none of that weakness. They are so swift, my eyes can barely keep up with them.

“I fear beastmen might not have the same daytime limitations that human zombies do...!” Lex cautions as he holds his sword at the ready.

Boneless Hams consist of animals and are just as fast during the day as at night. Maybe the curse affects beasts and those who share their blood differently from humans? Either way, now’s not the time to think about it!

“Fall in, men! Raise your shields and protect Lady Mizuha!” Following Lex’s orders, the Grantz soldiers encircle me with their shields out. Only Lex stays in position directly beside me.

“BWEEOOOW!”

One of the Lucor zombies rams against a shield. A dull thud cracks the air, followed by the sound of vibrating metal. The impact

knocks the soldier into the inner circle and bounces the zombie back onto the ground where it seems to have lost consciousness as it curls in on itself.

“Lex, this is our chance!”

“Agreed! Advance to the unmoving zombie’s position!” Lex orders the soldiers.

As we move, Lucor zombies lunge at us from multiple directions. The soldiers deflect them with their shields each time. Unlike the first one, not all the zombies lose consciousness after being hit by the shields—they get back up and charge at us with animal tenacity.

“Don’t break formation while assisting our fallen men!”

“I’m going to purify the first one!” I let our unit know and swiftly touch the head of the unconscious Lucor allowed into our circle. Bright light transforms its festering skin. The purple fades from its flesh, and the fur on its ears and tail is restored to its former fluffiness.

“Cu—” I don’t finish saying it’s cute because once the light disappears, it turns out to be a much older male Lucor with a dwarven beard.

Don’t get me wrong—there’s nothing wrong about there being old men among beastmen. I just wish that the first one I met was an adorable catgirl.

Even as I’m hoping for a cuter encounter, the Lucor zombies continue to pounce on us. The circle closes in tighter around me. We don’t have time to stop and let him rest.

Just then, the older Lucor opens his eyes and darts them around the area.

“Wh-What in the Great Forest was I—”

“I’m sorry to order you around when you are just waking up, but please keep pace with our formation!”

He seems confused but quickly senses our dire circumstances. He falls in step with our unit without another word.

“Let’s keep this up and purify them one by one!”

“Okay!” I answer Lex and purify each zombie as they are knocked back.

We had no room for error, but thanks to the soldiers’ tireless efforts, none of our members became zombies by the time we succeeded in purifying around twenty or so of the Lucors.

There might still be some lingering in the trees, but since we

can't see any more in our immediate vicinity, we decide to take a brief break. The newly dezombified Lucors are still trying to get their wits about them.

Lex walks over from where he was speaking with his men and talks to me. "Thank you for your valiant efforts, Lady Mizuha."

"You too, Lex. I was worried for a moment there, but...as long as nothing else about them changes, we can probably take on more." I let out a long, tired breath and wipe the sweat from my brow.

Then there's an abrupt heavy, thud behind me. I slowly turn around, certain I've spoken too soon, and find a furry zombie down on all-fours, hissing at me.



From the triangular ears and tail, I'm guessing it's another Lucor zombie that just jumped down from the trees. It's only a guess because this Lucor is well over six feet when all the others seemed shorter than five feet. This one is around the same height as Lex, if not taller.

"H-Hey, Lex? Didn't you say this tribe is distinct for its petite size?"

"...It appears my memory has failed me."

Meanwhile, the large Lucor zombie is continuing to hiss at us. Their hisses might be kind of cute if they got rid of the *bw*- and just moaned *-eow*. That'd be a *little* more catlike. Then again, not even the cutest cat in the world would be counted as cute if it was rotting and smelled of death.

"BWEEOOOOOOOOW!"

It lets out the loudest roar yet and pounces. Lex steps forward and deflects it with his shield. But the tall zombie immediately catches its balance. It even uses the momentum to hop into the trees and circle us from above by leaping from branch to branch.

"U-Ugh...it's not only big but faster and more agile than the others..." I groan.

"Please do not leave my side, Lady Mizuha!"

The other soldiers can't get too close with it in the trees. We don't know when or where the Lucor zombie might pounce. Then, the deadlock is broken with the sound of a branch snapping.

The tall zombie drops down on Lex's shield from the tree directly above us. The force is ten times what it was before. Lex catches its claws with his shield, but the impact throws him back.

"Lex!"

"I'm fine! Please run away!"

He doesn't have to tell me twice. I break into a run—but the Lucor zombie is already on me. Its right hand arcs through the air toward me. I reflexively duck, and somehow manage to avoid its claws. A sharp whistle and a cool breeze whoosh over my head.

Dodging that was sheer dumb luck. I need to get out of here now. But I doubt I can outrun a creature that is clearly several times faster than me.

Listening to my instincts, I thrust out my right hand. It conveniently smacks the Lucor square in the face. A nice, crisp slap echoes through the woods just as purifying light illuminates the

area. Delighted cheers erupt from the Grantz soldiers.

“There it is! Priestess Mizuha’s Full-Face Smack!”

“Will you *please* quit naming my slaps like they are special moves?!” The trouble is that when they say it, there’s no malicious intent. They truly mean it as a compliment. And that’s why I’m forever stuck being unable to really make them stop.

Thus, the immediate area’s zombie purification ended with the realization that I was surrounded by people with very odd perspectives.

The last zombie I purified is a woman, which I kind of guessed from her more pronounced chest. I can’t tell how old she is, but she seems close in age to me.

“I was just a zombie...how...?” She seems to have fallen into the confusion that often follows dezombification. She curls up on the ground and begins checking over her body.

Her waist-length hair is tied back in a ponytail. Lucors seem to share some traits with cats—her large yellow eyes have pupils that narrow into slits. But, overall, she gives off a gentle impression rather than a scary one.

Perhaps her moving ears and tail help with that. Her fur looks much softer and fluffier than the mangy appearance she had as a zombie. I have the urge to pet her. Typically when someone is tall and slender, most people immediately think of them as beautiful or cool, but I have the complete opposite reaction.

“Cute...!”

“...P-Pardon?”

She blinks at me. It’s only natural to be bewildered when a stranger calls you cute while you have absolutely no idea what is going on. But I just couldn’t help myself! Especially after my first Lucor turned out to be a bearded old man, and the rest weren’t any better. I hope she will forgive my urgency.

“Lady Mizuha! More Lucor zombies have come from deeper in the woods! Hurry!” Lex calls after me.

I look in the same direction as him and see another horde of Lucor zombies traversing the trees. There’s less than the last batch, but still more than ten. And there’s no telling if there aren’t more behind them. Taking them on sooner rather than later is a necessity.

“Sorry! I’m coming now!” I shout back to Lex, then offer a final word to the female Lucor rather than just run off. “I’m sorry, I’m in a hurry. Um, what’s your name...?”

“Nady Ol Theos La Quim Rom Lucor.”

Yeah, that was longer than expected.

“Nady O-Oltheo—what?”

“Nady is fine.”

“Okay, see you later then, Nady,” I say and sprint off toward Lex.

“U-Um! Thank you very much for saving me!” she shouts after me.

“You’re welcome!”

It’s not like I’m purifying zombies for the gratitude. But, it’s always nice to be thanked. It helps me endure the offensive stench wafting from my right hand. I keep my hand as far as possible from my face and get a good count on our incoming Lucor zombie horde.

“M’kay, time to round up and purify another batch of zombies!”

◆ Chapter 2: Hot Springs with Friends

“**IT’S** the Priestess! Priestess Mizuha has returned!”

“Look at all the people she saved! Our Priestess never ceases to amaze!”

“Ahh, I want her to *smack* me around again!”

“I can’t forget her Holy Slap!”

A large crowd welcomes us in the streets when we finally return from our three-day expedition. Most people lavish praise on me, with the occasional perverted remark tossed in.

“A-Ahaha...thanks...” I wave to the people as I walk in step with the Royal Knights.

“Lady Mizuha?” Lex cocks his head and peers at my face. “You look unwell. Is something wrong?”

“No. I’m just surprised they come out into the streets to welcome us back every time. Aren’t they sick of it yet?”

“It just goes to show how much they adore you, Lady Mizuha.”

“I’m glad they like me, but this is a little much. Besides, I’m not the only person who saved people. Every soldier fought for their lives to make it happen, so I wish they could share in the glory.”

“Lady Mizuha...”

It might be unavoidable that my contributions stand out the most because of my title as Priestess, but I wish they would lavish some of that praise on the other people who are fighting for the same cause.

At least that’s what I try to do.

“Your sentiments alone are enough to keep us going,” says the knight to my left.

“Indeed. I can abstain from food for the next ten days sustained solely by your words!” agrees the knight on my right.

“Don’t do that! I can’t have you passing out, so *please* eat,” I insist.

I can make an endless supply of apples—there’s no need not to eat.

“S-So many people.”

"I've never seen so many humans before."

"They're all so big...!"

I hear several awed voices behind me. Following the knights marching with me are the people I purified yesterday. There are a greater number of Lucors than humans with us this time.

After initially saving them, the Lucors wanted to remain in the forest. But I persuaded them to come with us by explaining the high risk of rezombification. It was decided they would temporarily reside in Grantz's capital.

The Lucors seem overwhelmed by the people of Grantz Kingdom. I'm sure the sea of humans is a piece of it, but it might have more to do with the sheer height difference. Then again, the one tall Lucor—Nady—seems equally frightened.

I slow down until I'm walking beside Nady. "Pretty alarming, isn't it?"

Nady gasps when she notices me. "I-It is. Y-You are very popular..." She nervously looks away from me before stiffly adding, "I a-apologize for the other day... I did not know you are the Holy Priestess."

"I'm not as grand as they make me sound. I'm just a schoolgirl who purifies zombies with the powers the Goddess randomly chose to give me. You don't have to pay me any extra respect."

"But...it is a fact you are *constantly* taking on zombies."

It's still scary to run into zombies even with the ability to purify them. I can tell Nady respects me because she understands that. For some reason, that makes me happier than usual. My gut instinct was right: Nady and I could become good friends.

"Hey, Nady? How old are you?"

"...Pardon?"

"Mm, it's a question about how many years you've lived," I explain. "Seventeen for me."

"Me...too..."

"I knew it! I thought we seemed close in age!" I had no way of knowing how long Lucors lived for, but I had a hunch she was around the same age.

"Big Sister!"

A girl comes running from the castle following that adorable squeal. With her turquoise gown and jewel-adorned golden hair fluttering in the wind, Cia Greenfield charges straight for me. This princess plans on jumping into my arms at breakneck speed.

That won't end well.

I thrust out my left hand and shout, "STOP!"

"AGH! B-Big Sister?!" Cia moans, her forehead coming in contact with my palm. Her watering eyes look up at me with the unspoken question of *why*.

I would love nothing more than to squeeze my adorable Cia right this second. After all, she is one of my few oases in this zombie-infested world. But...

"Sorry! We can't hug yet."

"Wh-Why not?"

"Uh, well, you know. I just came back from running around slapping zombies and a three-day expedition." I can't help being put off by my own body odor.

"Don't be that way... There is nothing for you to be ashamed of, Big Sis."

"Would you like to pass out again today?"

"I-I promise I will withstand it today for *sure*!"

"But you don't have to *suffer* through it."

The sentiment is enough for me. Or rather, I can't help feeling as if she's swooning because of my natural body odor, and that's honestly a huge blow to my self-esteem.

"Um, um...I had the bath prepared for you."

"That's my Cia! You know what I like!"

Since she knows my love of a good bath, she always has one readied for me when I return from expeditions. I couldn't have asked for a better "younger sister".

"Oh yeah, can I bring someone else with me?" I ask.

"I don't mind, but...is it Miss Iris?"

"Nope. *Never* her."

Iris is a woman with a few screws loose who worships me as the Goddess. She always goes overboard with things and constantly causes problems. She isn't bad at heart, but...I don't feel safe around her, so I avoid bathing together as much as possible. I fear the water will turn red with her nose bleeds.

"It's a girl I just met. Her name is Nady," I say as I turn toward Nady. Her eyes go round when they meet mine. She looks behind her, to her left, then her right before pointing to herself in disbelief.

"Y-You mean me...?"



“THIS is definitely the best thing after a long journey.”

“Will you do it for me too, Big Sis?”

“Sure thing. Here it comes!”

As soon as I entered the castle’s bathhouse, I poured warm water over my head. Per Cia’s request, I do the same for her too. This has become our tradition before entering the bathwater.

Drenched from the top of her head to her toes, Cia looks like a wet puppy with her long hair sticking to her. The one thing that differentiates her from a dog is that she doesn’t shake the water off. She keeps perfectly still, eyes closed. Giggling over how cute she is, I run a comb through her hair and remove the excess water around her eyes.

“You can open your eyes now.”

“Thank you for always rinsing me off.”

“Anytime!”

The next step is usually soaking in the water, but we can’t do that yet. “Planning on coming over here any time soon, Nady?” I call over my shoulder with a laugh.

“B-But...is it really all right for someone like me to partake in such a luxury?”

Nady is still lingering by the door. She looks like a completely different person with her hair down. She seems more mature this way. And well endowed. I rarely saw anyone so voluptuous in Japan.

“Don’t speak down about yourself. You don’t have to stand on ceremony with me,” I remind her.

“I believe the others made it clear to you what they think of me...” she mutters.

The Lucors seem to discriminate against Nady. I heard them mocking her as a giant, a freak, a beanstalk, and with variations of the word “useless” during our return journey.

Some even had the nerve to say “Why is the Priestess speaking with Nady?” when I slowed to chat with her.

“In any case, I am considered a freak of nature among the Lucors. I do not deserve your kindness—”

“I don’t know much about your people,” I interrupt. “But there’s nothing wrong with being different. I mean, I’m pretty sure I’m the biggest freak of nature there is in this world.”

“Th-That’s...”

I can purify zombies with my pinky finger and cleanse

corrosive water and land by hawking up a loogie. I'm a high school girl housing the power of an eccentric goddess. I win the "most different person in the world" badge simply for being from another world.

As I take pride in my uniqueness, Cia enthusiastically tosses in, "It's true! Big Sister Mizuha is special!"

"Yes, that's the word! Being different means you're *special*. Don't let it get to you! At least you can take comfort knowing we won't treat you differently. Right, Cia?"

"Of course not!"

Did our feelings reach her? Nady seems less like a nervous cat now.

I beckon her with my hand. "Come over here and sit in front of me."

She cautiously prowls closer and perches where I'm pointing. Examining her up close, it looks like the only thing that's different about her is the tail and ears. Her claws aren't too long, and she has silky, soft skin that's not covered in fur. When it comes down to it, she's not that different from a human.

"Okay, here comes the water. Close your eyes!" I warn as I pour the bucket of warm water over Nady's head. Her fluffy ears and tail instantly soak up the water and sag.

She seems to be copying Cia as she's staying perfectly still with her eyes shut. It's double the cuteness with the cat ears and tail.

I comb the excess water out of her hair as I did with Cia, taking the opportunity to pet her furry ears. The short fur has a silky texture and doesn't feel artificial at all—not that I really thought they were fake. I hope she will let me pet them when they aren't wet.

"You can open your eyes now," I say after wiping the water off her face.

"Th-Thank you," she replies sheepishly while opening her eyes. "Incredible...you only poured water on me and yet I feel like I received a deep cleanse!" She's in awe as she pats down her tail.

"You have Big Sis's *spit* to thank for that," Cia announces proudly.

"Cia, that's one detail you could have left out..." I sigh.

"I'm sorry, but there is nothing dirty about you."

I really wish she would realize how much her emphasis on that point is causing my self-esteem to crumble. And it's not just Cia, but

everyone in Grantz I want to make understand that.

"Anyway, time to get in the water! We're going to catch a cold this way," I say to change the topic, making my way to water in the process.

The three of us sit in the bath together. Naturally, the water level went up higher than when it's just me and Cia.

"Phew... I feel regenerated..." I let a sigh slip as the water permeates my fatigued body.

If I said a line like that in front of my friends in Japan, they would have teased me with "Oh my gosh, Mizuha! You sound like an old man!" But this is another world. I won't be judged for my bathing etiquette here.

I absolutely love taking baths. They seem to take the tension right out of your aching bones. Sadly, Nady seems too tense to enjoy it. She shrinks down into the water when our eyes meet, trying to submerge herself up to her neckline.

"I'm sorry for being so big," she mumbles.

"I wasn't looking at you because of—"

"U-Um, I think it's good to be big!" Cia encourages right over my explanation. It was so sudden, Nady looks baffled.

"Cia here wants to grow up fast," I explain.

"I...see..."

Primarily, it's the chest area Cia wants to grow fast. I think her figure is perfect the way it is right now, but she has a different opinion. Anyway, that has become one reason why she looks up to Nady now.

"You still have plenty of time to grow bigger," I say.

"But I have no assurance that I will get any bigger," she pouts, patting her chest.

Once she's older, I doubt she will make these cute gestures anymore. Either way, I don't want to see Cia sad. I hope she develops the way she wants to.

"You two seem close," Nady observes.

"We always manage to spend time together. She is the second person I purified."

"I still vividly remember your hand slamming into my face..." Cia folds both hands over her heart as if remembering a precious memory.

"I-It was that way for me too!" Nady exclaims, the water splashing with her excitement. "I was engulfed in light when the

Holy Priestess's hand touched my face! I distinctly remember the great shock that followed too..."

"I know what you mean! I can't believe you went through the same experience, Miss Nady!" Cia and Nady passionately discuss their experiences. I feel completely out of the loop.

"Excuse me, would you mind not hitting it off over such an *uncomfortable* topic for me?" I groan.

I'm not smacking them because I want to. I'm cornered into it. Though there is the OCCASIONAL time when I shove extra hard because I'm startled.

"By the way, any chance I can get you to stop calling me Holy Priestess?"

"But you are too important to be called anything else... I shouldn't even be speaking to you like this."

"But I want to be *friends*," I say, causing her jaw to drop.

"F-Friends?" she falters in disbelief.

"Yep. Friends call each other by name. I'm just gonna call you Nady."

"B-By name? I don't think I'm deserving of being addressed in such a *cute* way..."

"Why not? You're cute!"

Sure, my world and country tend to view small things as cute too. But that doesn't mean small is the only kind of cute. Case in point, Nady is as cute as they come to me. The other Lucors have cat ears and tails too, but her fur is especially pretty, and her golden eyes are stunning. Everything about her just screams "she's a nice girl!"

"Right from the moment I saw you, I wanted to be friends. Not interested?"

"I am—I'm interested." She corrected herself to speak more casually. Then she timorously mutters, "Mizuha..."

"There you go! Now you just have to say it with more confidence."

"It's not that easy the first time."

I can't disagree with that argument. Besides, what matters isn't how we address each other, but that we've become friends. She has stopped speaking so stiffly with me, so we're on the right track.

"By the way, have you decided what you want to do tomorrow, Big Sis?" Cia asks me.

"Resting for sure. I'm a bit pooped after this last expedition."

"I...see." Cia sinks into the water, dejected. She seems disappointed.

"What's wrong? Did you want to do something?"

"Some very pretty flowers have started growing inside the capital lately and I was hoping we could go look at them together."

"Oh, if that's all, I'm down for it."

"Are you certain? Wouldn't you rather rest your weary body?"

"It's all good. We're just going for a stroll to look at the flowers."

Strictly speaking, anything is all good as long as it doesn't involve zombies.

"Would you like to join us, Miss Nady?" Cia asks.

"I would hate to cut in on your time together."

"Any friend of Big Sis is a friend of mine!" It's just like Cia to put extra emphasis on *friend*.

Having lost her excuse, Nady reluctantly agrees to join us.

Beaming, Cia further suggests, "How about we show her around the capital while we are out?"

"Great idea!"

"Um, you needn't go that far for—"

"*Friends* don't hold back with each other, Nady."

Never to this day have I known how useful the word friends could be. Nady, whose face had been too taut to smile this entire time, blinks twice before her lips curve in a timid smile.

"O-Okay, Holy Pri—I mean, Mizuha."

◆ Chapter 3: Yet Another Hectic Day in the Capital

THE chill of early morning still lingers in the air as I walk through the capital with Cia and Nady like we promised to do the day before. Lex and a few knights are accompanying us—at a distance. He wanted to guard me more closely but agreed to give us space when I said I just wanted to enjoy time with my girlfriends without the fuss.

“Grantz’s capital was overrun by zombies too, right?” Nady asks, amazed by the streets brimming with activity around us.

“Yep. It was zombitopia just three months ago. The buildings had rotted, the water was filled with muck, and everything was pretty much falling apart,” I reply, remembering my first day in the capital.

“It’s so hard to imagine the capital that way seeing it now,” she says, looking at the fully repaired buildings.

As a member of the reconstruction crew, I’m proud of how far we have come in the past three months. Of course, it was only possible because the people of Grantz worked hard to bring back a sense of normalcy.

My country often experiences disasters, and each time, the people have come together to rebuild. Maybe that’s why I feel a special connection with the people here.

“Good morning, Priestess Mizuha!”

“Oh, it’s our priestess! Thank you for everything you do!”

Adults and children alike cheerfully greet me. There’s the occasional stiff who is awkwardly formal, but the majority of people here are easy to get along with. I respond to everyone and wave. Nady seems surprised by our interaction.

“I thought this when we first arrived in the capital, but you are overwhelmingly popular with the people.”

“Big Sis’s magnetism comes not from her title as Priestess, but from the actions she has taken to win over their hearts,” Cia proudly explains.

I always wonder how she's capable of glamorizing me in every little thing. I mean, I'm happy she adores me so much, but I'm scared to death of letting her see my ugly side.

"In the beginning, I just did what I had to to survive," I admit.

"But now it's more than that," she states confidently.

"W-Well...I guess you could say that."

Purifying the world with Goddess Sadia's powers as her chosen priestess—in the end, I chose to continue on this path. That's why I can't argue with Cia.

"How about you, ma'am? You will gain infinite joy if you join the Church of Our Lady Mizuha!"

I suddenly hear something unsettling in the distance. Warning alarms blaring in my head, my gaze lands on a young woman clad in what looks exactly like the distinctive habit worn by Catholic nuns. She's soliciting people in the streets.

There's no mistaking those violet eyes and the silver hair peeking out of her veil—it's Iris, the woman who believes without a doubt that I am her goddess. To make matters worse, she is surrounded by the other Mizuha Church cultists.

"By joining the Church of Our Lady Mizuha, you can live without fear of the zombies!"

"Your skin will be eternally soft and youthful!"

"Today is the day for you to join the Church of Our Lady Mizuha!"

They're spreading worthless nonsense again. Heck, I'd want to join if it meant I could have eternally youthful skin. Then again, this power does belong to a goddess, so that could be a possible use for it. Never hurts to try it. Looks like I have a new experiment to try on myself starting today—

"S-Say, Mizuha? What are they—"

"Don't look. Your life will never be the same if you do."

Just as I give Nady that warning, I accidentally make eye contact with one of the cultists in the street. We both freeze as if time has stopped around us, before things start snowballing out of control.

"Sister Iris, it's Goddess Mizuha! She has honored us with her holy presence!"

"She has?! After her! I'm going to get my head rub—I mean, a *divine revelation* today!"

"Crap! We don't want to get caught! Run for it!" I shout to the

girls.

We hurtle into the back alleys and race around several dozen winding corners. Cia doesn't have much stamina. It's unlikely we will be able to escape them for good, but I don't sense them directly behind us anymore. I assume Lex did something about them for me. We exit the alleyway onto a different street and stop to catch our breath.

"I think we're safe now," I sigh.

"Th-They seem like very *zealous* believers," Nady says, sounding overwhelmed.

"They won't stop no matter how I plead with them..."

"If you give the order, I will bring the full might of Grantz down on them, Big Sister," Cia offers. It's scary because she's serious.

"Uhh... I don't think we need to go that far."

I'm flattered they idolize me, but starting a whole religion to worship me is too extreme. Still, they haven't really hurt anyone. And they did play an active part in punishing the person who summoned Diallo. At any rate, I have reservations over squashing their group just because they make me uncomfortable.

"MiZUha!"

"Oh gosh, he's the next one out of the woodwork..." I cringe.

"Indeed. They just keep coming..." Cia and I sigh together over the obnoxious voice behind us.

"What keeps coming?" Nady asks, the only one who doesn't know better.

Anyone who hangs out with me will eventually learn his name whether they want to or not. After all, I have a nearly ninety-nine percent encounter rate with him if I'm in the capital.

"I was really hoping you wouldn't show up today."

I heave the heaviest sigh yet as I turn around. Right behind me is a young man who looks like the poster child for spoiled noblemen—Keith Rowadan. He's an annoying guy who habitually proclaims his love for me because he feels our meeting was fate.

"Then that means you prefer me to show up on certain days," he says, coming to the wrong conclusion.

"Nope. I never want you to show up, just more so today."

"HAHA! I see you are ever the shy lady, MiZUha."

Keith never takes a hint no matter how blunt I am. Either he's deaf or has a mind of steel. Whichever it is, his persistence is the

epitome of harrying.

“Mizuha, who is this?” Nady asks nervously.

“Keith Rowadan. He’s a man with his head screwed on backward.”

“You’re so harsh, MiZUha. You should have introduced me as ‘the man who loves me more than anyone in the world.’”

“As you can see, he is not someone you can hold a conversation with.”

“I-I can see that.”

Nady is more put off by Keith than even the Mizuha Fanatics. I don’t blame her. I felt the same way when I first met him too. And I still do.

Cia steps in front of Keith with her eyebrows turned down in a stern scowl. “Lord Rowadan, I believe I gave you a firm warning not to pester Big Sister Mizuha.”

“Why, if it isn’t Her Highness, the Princess. I apologize for not greeting you sooner.” Keith sweeps his arm under his chest in a gallant bow, paying his respects as a noble, before cheekily dismissing her warning. “As for MiZUha...she and I are bound by the red thread of fate. Alas! We have been since the day I received that heavenly blow that shook me to my core and saved me from the depths of darkness with a godly light!”

“Yeah...that was just the purification light,” I demur. “Everyone else experiences it too.”

“Even so! I am absolutely *positive* no one else experienced the same hard blow that I did!”

True...I might’ve hit him twice as hard as everyone else if he was just as persistent as a zombie. Though that has absolutely *nothing* to do with affection or positive emotions...

“All right, MiZUha, why don’t you come away with me? I have prepared a superb lunch for you today!”

“No thanks. I’m not going anywhere with you ever.”

He never listens to a word I say. Keith reaches for me to whisk me away with him, but Nady grabs his arm before it touches me.

“Sorry, but Mizuha is uncomfortable with you touching her!”

“What’s the deal with you, *cat*?” Keith scoffs. “Where did you come from?”

“I have been here from the start.”

“I only have eyes for MiZUha, you see.”

Apparently, Keith’s eyes are still experiencing zombie rot.

“Does that mean you have forgotten *whose* presence you are in, Lord Rowadan?”

“N-Naturally I always see you too, Your Highness.” Even Keith falters before Cia’s pointed remark. It doesn’t make him back down though. “Wh-Whoever you are, release my hand! Only MiZUha’s pure hands can touch me.”

“No. I refuse to let go.” Nady stubbornly holds on. She must have some serious grip strength because Keith can’t shake her off.

She cares about me enough to do this even with her timid personality. I’m thrilled she likes me that much, but I don’t want her invoking Keith’s ire. He’s a weirdo down to the bone, but still a noble. I can just see this taking a troublesome turn if things go too far. I have to do something.

“Lord Rowadan, that is enough out of you.”

Lex arrives just when I need him. Keith has lost to him countless times and his face twists with disgust knowing his time is up.

“Lex Irvine... You dare to tear me from MiZUha yet again?!”

“We aren’t close enough to be torn apart,” I point out.

“Lady Mizuha has made her feelings clear,” Lex states dryly.

“She’s only being bashful because there are onlookers.”

“I see. It appears Lord Rowadan has business at the library. Escort him there.”

Two knights appear behind Lex and begin dragging Keith away.

“U-Unhand me! I have no business at the library! It is *you* who should hit the books, dumb brutes! Who do you think I am?! *Grr!* I’ll remember this, Lex Irvine!”

Keith disappeared around the corner leaving behind an awfully villainous one-liner. I’ve seen him carted off more times than I can count, and he always kicks up such a fuss on the way.

“I owe you one, Lex.”

“Nonsense. I merely did my duty as your knight, Lady Mizuha. Call if you need me again.”

It seems like he took protecting me from the shadows as the rule of the day, since he walked away to give us girls space again. I don’t know why, but he seems a tad cooler today. Nah, it’s just me imagining things.

“Thank you for standing up for me, Nady.”

“You don’t have to thank me. We’re...*friends*, after all.”

I was a little worried that I had forced her into being my friend. So hearing her affirming our friendship makes me extra happy.

“Thank you too, Cia.”

“I simply did my part as your younger sister.”

We ran into two obstacles in the beginning, but the rest of our stroll through the capital went off without a hitch. Now we have finally arrived at our destination: a plaza near the entrance into the city. Various flowers are blooming in the sea of green. But the flower in the center of the plaza stands out in particular. It has four large, pristine, white petals. Each of the petals curls upward at the tip while the flower itself has a natural droop.

“Is this the flower you were talking about, Cia?”

“Yes. It is called the holy flower.”

“...I don’t like the sound of that.”

“It is believed this flower was born of your purification as it is a variety we have never seen before. The people are calling it the holy flower because it comes from the Holy Priestess.”

“I *knew* it!” I figured when I heard the name, but I hate when I’m right. I can’t look at it the same way now that I know it grew out of my spit.

It’s still pretty—in an uncomfortable way.

I hadn’t realized it, but a lot of people have gathered in the plaza to admire the Holy Flower.

“Beautiful...”

Nady is entranced by it. I guess if it makes her and everyone else happy, it doesn’t matter where or what it came from.

“AGHHHHHHHHH!”

A loud scream in the distance interrupts my flower appreciation. Not only are there no more zombies inside the capital, but we are also surrounded by tall, thick walls. The one usable gate is guarded by anti-zombie trained soldiers. Little gets by them. Even more so during the day when zombies are slow.

But the zombies have adapted in ways I couldn’t imagine several times before. I won’t discard the notion they’ve done it again.

I spin toward where Lex is. “Lex!”

“Let’s head straight there!” he responds.

◆ Chapter 4: Coming From There is Unfair

WE grasped the general direction of the commotion from the screams and the steady stream of fleeing people. After running through several streets, we finally come out on a tiny back road where *it* is.

“BWAAHH!”

“Of course it’s a zombie...”

How did it get inside the walls? Questions can come later though, because I have to do something about the small boy who is scooting away from a zombie on his butt first. The zombie slowly ambles toward him.

“Lex!”

“URAAAAAAAAAH!”

Lex springs into action faster than I call on him. He deflects the zombie with his shield and stands between it and the boy. I rush in behind him and help the child up.

“It’s going to be all right,” I say.

“Miss Priestess! Mommy...Mommy is...!”

It appears the zombie is this boy’s mother. If I look past the grotesque rot and decay, the long hair and figure does appear to belong to a woman. I’d better save his mother soon before this image gets burned into his mind and becomes a permanent trauma.

“Cia, Nady, take care of him for me!”

“You can entrust him to us!”

“O-Okay!”

I leave the boy to them and assist Lex. He takes the initiative by knocking the zombie back and pinning it to the ground, careful not to cause too much harm in the process. I slip in and touch her leg before she can break free.

“Another excellent rescue, Lady Mizuha.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Lex.”

We have dealt with countless zombies before—we’re used to it by now. The zombie reverts back to human while we’re catching our breath.

The young woman definitely resembles the boy who called her mommy. Still in a confused daze, she confirms her body is completely unzombified before running over to her son and hugging him. They revel in each other's safety for a minute, then look up at me with teary smiles.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"Thank you for saving Mommy, Miss Priestess!"

I don't do it for the thanks, but seeing their smiles fills me with joy. It acts as a reminder about why I chose to stay in this world.

"Mizuha! Get away from there! *Quick!*" Nady cries out in panicked warning.

"...Huh?"

Unsure of what I'm supposed to be getting away from, I stand there dumbfounded. I just finished purifying the only zombie—the threat should be gone. Where am I supposed to be running to?

"SKRIEEEEEE!"

An unsettling screech comes from the sky behind me. I whirl around and look up. My view is blotted out by a black bird. It looks like a crow, but...one eye is missing, its wings are tattered, and it's covered in rot—a zombie bird, no doubt about it. But there's something I need to be more concerned with than its ghastly appearance.

The zombie bird is diving *right* for my face!

"Uwah!"

I quickly move to the side, barely escaping the bird's trajectory by the skin of my teeth. The flying zombie whizzes by me at a tremendous speed. I would've had a hole ripped out of me right about now if it had hit me. I swallow my sigh of relief and shudder when I see what it's doing. The zombie bird has ascended high into the sky and is circling back to dive bomb me again.

Its descent is even faster and sharper than before. It's right on me. I might be worse off than I thought.

All I can see is the zombie bird's gnarly wingspan. A fraction of a second before its beak tears into my nose, I'm slammed from the side. The world spins from the impact and I hit the ground on my back. Luckily, I didn't whack my head. What happened?



The face I open my eyes to says it all. Lex. He must've taken me into his arms and dove out of the bird's way. I wish I could relax thinking I'm safe now, but the zombie bird is still gunning for me. I have to keep moving.

Or that's what I thought until I spot the zombie bird where I had just been standing. It's a splattered mess on the ground. It probably swept down too fast—it couldn't pull up in time.

"Urgh..." I squeak, my stomach twisting just looking at it.

"Are you uninjured, m'lady?" Lex asks.

"I-I'm okay..." I sputter. My thoughts instantly shift from the zombie splatter to something entirely unrelated—my current position.

Lex is straddling me. His face is so close that if I just lift my head slightly, our foreheads will collide. Frankly, this is too close for comfort.

"I'm so glad to hear that..." Lex sounds relieved from the bottom of his heart.

I can't help being conscious of his tranquil face when I know it's an expression meant solely for me. It's really unfair that his face is so *ridiculously* handsome. But any more of this and my face is a goner—it's so hot, it feels like it's going to erupt.

"Uhh, Lex? Thank you for saving me, but...um, I would appreciate it if you got off me now..."

I beat around the bush too much—Lex doesn't get it right away. But when he does, he leaps off me like a cat frightened by a sudden noise.

"M-My humblest apologies!" he stammers.

"It's okay. You were only helping me. Yeah. It doesn't bother me one bit! Thanks." I accept his proffered hand and stand.

Seeing as Lex won't look at me, I think it's safe to say he's just as conscious of what happened. I'm not sure if that makes me happy or just plain embarrassed.

Cia and Nady run over while we're still being awkward with each other.

"Are you all right, Big Sister?"

"Yeah. I made it out without a scratch thanks to Lex. Thank you for the warning, Nady."

"I didn't do anything much. I only called out to you."

"It is thanks to your word of warning that I acted as fast as I

did. You have my gratitude, Lady Nady.” Lex bows to her.

“Please don’t thank me!” Nady shrinks away. She’s too modest. If not for her warning, I’m not sure what would have happened to me. That goes to show just how unexpected and unusual this zombie encounter was.

I shift my gaze back to the zombie bird smear. “Well, this was a new one...”

“It was likely a bird, m’lady. Or to be precise, a zombie that used to be a bird.”

“I thought so...”

It has wings, a long beak, and talons. As for the torso, it’s too contorted and gross to make out, but it’s *totally* rotten. Interestingly enough, it’s about the same size as the crows in Japan.

“That’s the monster that turned Mommy into a zombie!” the boy shouts, pointing at the deformed bird.

Lex and I share a worried look.

“I thought it strange for zombies to appear within the castle walls during the day without the gate falling...” Lex says.

“Now they can come from the sky? Ugh...another pest to add to the list.”

Zombie birds can fly over the walls, infect people inside, and potentially do lethal damage with those dive bombs. Judging by what I’ve seen of their movement, zombie birds and animals are unaffected by sunlight.

“I guess we can’t claim it’s safe during the day or within the walls anymore,” I sigh.

“So it seems. This requires immediate countermeasures to be put in place,” Lex concludes.

◆ Chapter 5: Not Zombie Free Yet

“I always remember the first time whenever I come here,” Cia says, nostalgia in her voice.

“The time we tried to purify the castle, right? That was a serious life or death struggle.”

“To this day, your bravery continues to inspire me, Big Sister.”

“Ahaha... I think I was more reckless than brave.”

The next day, not long after the sun rose, Cia and I are chatting about the past as we cross the drawbridge over the moat isolating the castle. This bridge can easily be named the most dangerous place I had to purify. I could go on for forever talking about the dangers I encountered here, but we didn’t come to the bridge to talk about the past.

I have plans to meet up with Nady again today. We’re supposed to meet up on this drawbridge. As I’m chatting with Cia, I see someone with perked triangular ears and a fluffy tail running toward us from the city side. There’s no mistaking it’s her.

“I’m sorry. Did you wait long?” she asks once she’s on the bridge, then catches her breath.

“We just got here too. Didn’t we, Cia?”

“Yes, it wasn’t much of a wait because it gave me time to enjoy a pleasant chat with Big Sis.”

That’s basically a roundabout way of admitting we had been waiting. Apparently Cia only counts it as waiting if she is bored. Well, she’s too cute to mind how she words things.

“I feel bad about making you go out of your way to meet me here...”

“We’re the ones who invited you today,” I say to assure her. “Besides, I know how scary it can be to enter the castle grounds alone.”

“Yeah, it certainly is daunting... Ahaha.” Nady forces a nervous laugh.

Cia tilts her head. “Why is that?”

“It’s different for you because it’s your *home*, Cia.”

The castle belongs to the royal family and Cia sleeps there. It's only natural she wouldn't have the same reservations. Though the same could be said for me as it's where I live in this world and I do treat it like a second home now.

"Anyway, no point wasting the day here. Let's go!"

It goes without saying that Lex is on guard detail today as well. He's following from a few feet behind us out of consideration for my request from the other day. I shoot him a look, signaling him to come as I set out through the gate with Cia and Nady.

The gatekeepers instantly stand at attention when they see me and Cia. They keep things formal when there are people around or if Cia is with me, otherwise we often have casual conversations when it's just me and Lex. Our relationship is a bit like neighbors on good terms.

"I'm sorry yesterday's outing turned gruesome."

"That's not your fault, Mizuha. It's part of your job," Nady says, being considerate of me.

The whole zombie bird attack ended up cutting our tour of the capital short. So we decided to have a tea party today to make up for it. Though really, that's just an excuse to spend more time with Nady.

"Are zombie birds...common?" she asks.

"Humans are the most common. I saw a zombie bird once before, but it didn't attack me like this one did."

The last one I saw appeared during our quest to vanquish the Dark Djinn. When I saw it then, it seemed more like a scout. I never saw it again, so I sort of shelved birds as non-threats. But after yesterday, I need to stay on the lookout for them.

Cia frowns up at the sky. "Archers are our only option for shooting them out of the sky."

"They would need to be skilled archers because not only are zombie birds on the small side, they also move quickly," I respond, trying to strategize from a noncombatant's standpoint.

Nady's ears droop and her face darkens.

"Something wrong, Nady?"

"N-No. It's nothing. I was just thinking."

She looked awfully concerned for "just thinking". I'm worried, but I don't want to pry too much when she purposefully avoided the question.

"Sir Lex!"

A panicked voice greets us moments after we enter the castle. I turn around to find a knight running up to Lex, his expression grave. As they converse, Lex's face darkens.

"Never a quiet moment, is there?" Cia says.

"I wonder what happened."

I have the day off from my priestess duties, but I won't ignore an emergency because of it. Cia and I share a look and walk back to where Lex and the knight are talking.

"What's wrong, Lex?"

"...Lady Mizuha. I was hoping to let you rest today."

"More trouble? Where's the zombie?"

"There's no zombie, but...the matter isn't entirely unrelated to you, m'lady." Lex seems hesitant to discuss it with me. "Please allow me to receive permission from His Majesty before disclosing the details."



"I have come per your summons, Your Majesty."

"Good to see you, Lex. Thank you for coming as well, Holy Priestess Mizuha."

Lex brought me to the king's private office. When I asked him to explain what's going on, he told me I needed to hear it directly from the king. Cia and Nady are in attendance with us too.

The office is full of simple yet luxurious furniture. It lacks the bombastic flourishes of the royal audience chamber. Thanks to that, my nerves aren't acting up on me. Another big reason I'm no longer nervous is because I have met with His Majesty many times within the castle since rescuing him and his wife.

In the three months since then, he has completely recovered and his skin has regained a healthy glow. He's a silver fox with rugged good looks—I can easily imagine him becoming an actor who always scores the king role in period dramas if he lived on Earth. I understand why he has fanatic fangirls, but Jela took her obsession too far by starting the zombie apocalypse just to have him.

"Are you sure you don't mind telling me?" I ask, curtsying like Cia taught me.

"It's fine. You aren't uninvolved in this matter."

Lex said the same thing earlier. Is that their roundabout way of saying it has something to do with me?

The king's hard expression instantly softens when he sees Cia curtsying beside me. "I see you are with the Holy Priestess again, Cia."

"Yes, Father. I was about to have tea with the girls," Cia replies, looking from me to Nady.

"Interesting. I didn't expect the day would come when I would see Lucors in the capital." He seems surprised by Nady.

"Hey, Cia?" I whisper. "Are Lucors that rare?"

"They are. Lucors typically live in the forests and rarely show themselves in places with lots of people like the capital."

Fidgeting uncomfortably, Nady mutters, "I can leave if I am a nuisance." Her ears and tail droop in unison.

"Stay. May I inquire of your name?" His Majesty asks.

"I-I am Nady Ol Theos La Quim Rom Lucor."

"Oh? Then you are Theos's daughter?" A delighted smile breaks out on the king's handsome face. Not only was he unsurprised by her long name, but he even determined her father's name from it. That's a king for you.

"You know my father?"

"Of course I know him. He is the Lucor Chieftain after all."

It sounds like the king and Nady's father are acquaintances. So if Nady's dad is the Lucor Chieftain, then...

"Wait, you're the chief's daughter, Nady?!" I cry out a little louder than I meant to.

"Y-Yeah," she falters.

I had no idea, even though we're friends. I mean, sure, we only just became friends, so obviously I couldn't have known, but still. I can't help being a little shocked by it.

My friends are a princess and a chieftain's daughter. I'm just a normal high school girl surrounded by the daughters of country and tribal leaders. I have my title as priestess, but it was something I acquired, not that I was born into. I'm not going to start acting differently with them at this point in the game, but it's another reminder of the kind of amazing people I hang out with.

"Can you tell us what happened now, Father?"

"Very well. Someone from Torstana was among the people Priestess Mizuha saved during the last expedition."

If memory serves me right, Torstana is neighbors with Grantz

Kingdom. I remember hearing they were at war with a country called Ladan.

“Are you speaking of Mr. Kodbyen?” Nady asks.

“I am,” His Majesty acknowledges.

“Know him, Nady?”

“Yeah. He’s a merchant who often travels between my village and Cladorca.”

“He’s a traveling merchant, then? What’s Cladorca?”

“It’s Torstana’s biggest trade city near Grantz. Though it’s more like a fortress with a mountain range surrounding it.”

It sounds about right for a border city to double as a fortress. In any event, I’m not seeing the big deal with this merchant being from Torstana.

“Why is this Torstana merchant a problem?” I ask, urging the king to continue.

“He pleaded with me to make the Holy Priestess purify his homeland.”

“Aah. Now I get it.”

It definitely has something to do with me then. Or more like, this is a conversation that can’t continue without my input.

“I turned him down.”

“Why...?”

“As you know, Torstana has warred with Ladan for years, creating chaos in the world. Goddess Sadia made it clear that their war brought the Dark Djinn on us. We mustn’t purify such vile countries,” His Majesty declares.

I understand the logic behind not wanting to aid them. If we purify Torstana, we will eventually have to do the same for Ladan. Once both kingdoms are back, they will likely resume their war.

Worse yet, Torstana might even prevent us from purifying Ladan. Or, if they take it a step further, they could very well attack Grantz with Ladan out of the picture. There’s no end to the potential risks. But we are talking about fellow humans first and foremost.

“Do you intend to leave them as zombies forever?” I ask outright.

“That depends...” His Majesty says evasively. He is bound by various obligations as the king of one nation.

“Lady Mizuha,” Lex cautions, trying to stop me from pressing the matter.

I, however, am not one to hide what I think. “To be honest with you, when I first saw the tall, fortress walls surrounding this city, I was against purifying it because I wanted nothing to do with a kingdom at war. My initial impression was wrong. We can’t leave an entire kingdom crawling with zombies be.”

Zombies rot the land they stand on and everything they come in contact with. In other words, as long as zombies exist, the threat of decay will never leave the world.

“I promised Goddess Sadia that I will assist in purifying the entire *world*, not just one kingdom,” I stress.

“I also believe it should be done *someday*. However...I ask you to wait for the time being,” the king requests, his face hard.

At first, I saw promise in his words, until I realized that “someday” is a word parents often use to appease children for things they never intend to do.

◆ Chapter 6: Ugh!

“I’M so frustrated...!” I grumble while walking away from the king’s office. Cia, Nady, and Lex are letting me vent. I feel bad airing my complaints, but I can’t get over my annoyance unless I talk it out.

“You always act like it’s not your problem. I’m surprised to hear you actively *want* to purify zombies, Lady Mizuha,” Lex says.

“I still hate it. It’s dangerous, scary, and reeks worse than bleu cheese left in the sun to rot!”

“Wh-Why are you frustrated then?”

“Ugh... I don’t know how to explain it...”

It’s times like this that I especially despise my inability to communicate my feelings. With a little time, I think I could sort it out, but it’s still a jumble to me right now.

“If the circumstances were different, His Majesty would give the order to purify as many people as possible. But it is a given that the people of Cladorca would pressure us into purifying their royal capital next,” Lex reasons. “That will only increase Grantz’s external enemies as they will surely threaten us with military force.”

“I know. But I don’t purify people for political reasons,” I argue.

I hate the stench of zombies with a passion, but I’d hate even more for there to be bloodshed. They underestimate the sensibilities of someone who grew up lazing around in a peaceful country.

“Besides, I doubt the people of this world can withstand living in fear of zombies forever. Don’t think just because they are beyond the border that you can ignore them.”

“Th-That is another problem...”

Seeing Lex stumped gives me a headache. I know I’m being willful, but I’m not wrong either—nor is Lex or His Majesty. I exhale all the air I possibly can in hopes it will rid me of the irritation building in my chest.

“Am I being childish?” I mutter.

“I don’t think so.”

“...Nady.”

“You are thinking about everyone equally, outside the confines of political allegiances.”

Just hearing that relieves some of the weight pressing down on me. On the other hand, having my opinion acknowledged makes me wonder whether I’m on the right track or not. I still don’t know what’s right.

Cia folds her hands together and hangs her head beside me. “I’m sorry, Big Sister.”

“It’s not your fault, Cia.”

“But it’s *my father* who made the decision.” I didn’t think this one out. By criticizing the king, I’m making his daughter feel guilty. I shouldn’t have vented in front of her.

“I’m sorry, Cia.”

“...Big Sister.”

I run my fingers through her hair as a peace offering. Some of the tightness goes out of her cheeks as she relaxes.

I still need to grow up. I’ve failed as her “older sister.” I begin engaging in some serious soul-searching when a short man walks around the corner.

His bearded face is too craggy to guess his age. Triangular ears perk up on his head and a brown tail swishes behind him—he’s a Lucor. The man’s catlike eyes go round when he sees Nady.

“...Nady?”

“F-Father?”

They aren’t just acquainted, but parent and child. Except at a distance, their height is so different you would mistake which is which. Up close, the father is clearly wrinkled—older, so there’s no mistaking their relationship.



Noticing my surprise, Nady quickly introduces him. “Um, this is my father. Father, this is Mizuha. I’m sure you already know this, but she’s the Holy Priestess who saved us.”

“H-Hello, sir,” I greet with my head bowed. Nady’s dad has a stern-looking face—I naturally default to being polite.

“Thank you very much for your assistance the other day, Holy Priestess. Allow me, Theos Ol Jino La Tiro Muo Lucor, to thank you on behalf of my people.”

“I was only doing my job, sir. I see long names run in the family.”

“You may call me Theos.”

I wish he had just introduced himself with that one name then, but there must be a cultural reason for starting with their full name. I need to have Nady teach me the meaning of their names someday soon.

“Why have you come to the castle, Father?”

“I summoned him.”

Nady’s question was answered by a giant man who came from a different corner. This towering muscleman is Oden Jaxor. He’s the Reigning King of Charges who inevitably injures everyone in his path and the captain of the Grantz Royal Knights.

“Lucors are some of the best archers in the world. After hearing about the zombie bird in the capital, I decided to request his assistance in training our men in archery and he graciously accepted.”

“We were also hoping to return the favor of borrowing living quarters in the royal capital and this presents the perfect opportunity to do so.”

Both sides can benefit from the arrangement. Sounds like a win-win to me.

Sir Oden puzzles his brow for a moment before facing Cia. “How would you like to watch, Your Highness? Your presence will surely raise morale. I would love for the other two ladies to join as well.”

“If Big Sister wants to, I will.”

“It’s up to you, Mizuha.”

It appears I have the final say of the day. I’m not a fan of making decisions, but I’m glad for once that it falls on me. After all, it sounds like the perfect thing to distract me from frustrating

politics.

“I want to go. It sounds like a unique opportunity.”

◆ Chapter 7: The Lucor Technique

“I don’t think I’ve ever been here before.”

“You have never needed to because you don’t wield a weapon, Lady Mizuha.”

Sir Oden and Theos left to greet the king together, so the rest of us went on ahead to the training grounds. It’s only a short walk from the castle that takes less than five minutes.

The training grounds spread out next to the stone barracks. Many soldiers are outside training in various ways, such as swinging wooden swords and blocking with shields. Everyone stands at attention when they notice Cia, but they return to their mock duels when she says “Please continue.”

“Does everyone seem scarily fired up to you? Or is this normal for them?” Overwhelmed, Nady hides behind me, the fur on her tail sticking up. Her ears are flicked back, which only adds to her adorableness.

“I totally agree. Cia’s presence probably has something to do with it.”

“I believe they are putting on a show for *you*, Big Sis.”

“Nah, I doubt that.” It’s kind of depressing denying it myself. Fortunately, I’m saved from further embarrassment thanks to several dozen dry thuds repeating in rapid succession.

Following the sound, I spot around ten people loosing arrows in a row further down the training grounds. They are aiming for logs sticking out of the ground around 150 feet away. The target seems to be a cross that was carved into the log with a knife. My high school had an archery club, but this world doesn’t have the round stands or 3-D archery targets they did.

“Wow, look at them go! Nice shot!”

My feet quickly carry me straight to the shooting range. Everyone is taking turns shooting in sets of ten. Some hit the bull’s eye first shot, while others are nowhere close.

As I’m watching, I accidentally mutter “Aw, so close!” out loud. I clamp my hands over my mouth since my utterance drew

looks. So embarrassing!

“Would you like to try your hand at archery, Lady Mizuha?”

Lex asks.

“Can I? Won’t I get in their way?”

“Not if we use the far corner.”

“Th-Then I would love to. Watching piqued my curiosity. Oh, but will you teach me? I’ve never used a bow before.”

“Of course, m’lady.”

Just like that, my observation secretly turned into a test run. The bow Lex hands me looks completely different from the ones I’m familiar with.

It’s an ugly, unfinished-looking yew bow that’s astonishingly stiff and large, despite the knobs. The bowstring is locked in nice and tight, but I can see it fraying up close. It’s absolutely nothing like a composite bow or a *manufactured* product, which obviously, it wouldn’t be.

Not that an amateur like me needs a decent bow.

“Let the bow grip fall into the pocket of your hand... Yes, that’s it there,” Lex instructs. “Spread your legs a little more. Good. Now release the tension in your shoulders.”

“Uh, Lex? I know I asked for you to teach me, but can I get a little space...?”



Lex's large hand is covering mine on the bow grip. His broad, armor-covered chest is pressed up against my back. And most disconcerting of all is how he's so close that I can see the finer details of his long eyelashes. My heart can't help drumming a noisy beat. Yesterday's close-encounter after the zombie bird made me more aware of him as a man—it's doubly embarrassing now.

"M-My humblest apologies!" Finally realizing it, Lex jumps away from me as if I've turned into a zombie. His reaction is enough to tell me his close proximity was purely out of an innocent desire to teach me. I understand he has no ulterior motives, but you can never underestimate the feelings of a high school girl with zero dating experience.

"Please try shooting as I just showed you!"

"O-Okay!"

We both raise our voices louder than necessary. I'm overly conscious of people staring at us, but decide to shove it out of my mind for now. My face is burning—the sun will set before my heart shuts up. I take a deep breath and release the arrow from my hand.

The arrow zips through the air with a whoosh. But it quickly loses its momentum and falls awkwardly without striking the ground. It went about 130 feet at a glance. Even if I was aiming for the log, it wouldn't have made it.

"I-It's nowhere close... Embarrassing..."

"It takes practice, m'lady."

"I might've been a little scared that the arrow vein was rubbing the string too."

I don't have superhuman strength like Lex, but I've always been confident in my physical ability. So I was positive I would do better on my first try, which only makes this result even more frustrating.

"Please cheer up, Big Sis. You did better than me. When I tried it, the arrow dropped right at my feet," Cia says woefully.

"You probably need a little more muscle to shoot further," I reply with a wry smile.

"You think so too?"

Cia doesn't have any health issues, so she could do with a little more exercise to build up her stamina. Then again, I would prefer if she didn't overdo the muscles.

Sir Oden arrives at the training grounds while I'm having fun

taking practice shots. Seven Lucors, including Theos, are with him. Sir Oden calls over the training soldiers and introduces them to the Lucors.

“The Lucors are going to put on an archery demonstration for us today. You men better pay close attention! There have been reports of zombie bird attacks in the capital. Burn the Lucor technique into your brains so you can face enemies at any distance!”

After Sir Oden’s introduction, the Lucors promptly take up their bows and shoot at the logs without an ounce of nervousness. Every single arrow strikes its target.

“Wow!” I exclaim. “They never miss!”

“I have heard stories of their skill, but it’s even more impressive to see it.” Lex is glued to their demonstration as well.

If they can shoot like that, then they shouldn’t have any problem taking down the zombie birds, even with the way they zoom through the air. They can easily pass for archery specialists. And Theos stands out as a master of the masters. Every arrow he releases pierces right through the cross carved into the log.

“Your dad is amazing, Nady. I can see why he’s the chieftain.”

“Y-Yeah. The best archer tends to be chosen as chieftain,” she explains.

Is it just me or are Theos’s arms bulging abnormally? His muscles look like they are going to rip right out of his skin. Is that normal? Should they be larger than his head? Am I the only one bothered by it? I search the area for anyone else sharing my concerns, but I only find people awed by his skills. Maybe that’s a Lucor thing?

I shake my head and decide to forget about it since I doubt I’ll get a logical answer. I’ve learned how to adapt and move on quickly since coming to this world.

“Are you just as skilled, Nady?” I ask, secretly hoping she doesn’t share her father’s bulging muscles.

“I’m nothing compared to the others...”

“I would love to see you do it anyway!”

“Um...” Nady looks away and says nothing more. She doesn’t seem up for it.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“No, I don’t mind,” she answers with a small smile after a slight pause.

I think I might have pushed her into something she doesn't want to do, but she did agree to it. It almost feels like it would be worse to tell her not to now, so I'm going to gratefully accept her willingness.

"Excuse me, are there any larger longbows?" Nady asks shyly after looking through the bows propped up at the end of the shooting range.

I expected the Lucor bows to be too small because of the good foot size difference between them, but it appears Grantz soldiers also use the wrong size bow for her.

"We only have two sizes—"

"You can use mine," Sir Oden says over the soldier in charge of handing out the bows and arrows. He is holding a bow that's almost one whole size bigger than the rest. It's likely his personal bow given how much larger he is than the rest of his men.

"Thank you for letting me borrow it."

Nady accepts the bow, stands at the end of the archery line, and takes her stance facing the target. She releases the first arrow with practiced ease. Unfortunately, it misses the log, but that seemed to be a practice shot.

She resumes an open stance after running her hands over the bow, string, and arrow, getting a feel for its kinks. Holding the bow, she seems completely different from the timid girl I've come to know.

I hear the string trembling before the arrow zips through the air. It cuts through the wind without deviating from its course and strikes the center of the cross on the log. Wood splinters with the impact that was louder than anyone else's shot, causing everyone to stop what they are doing and stare.

"Oh my!" I shout with glee, forgetting to say "gosh" because I'm too *wowed* to finish my sentence.

"...I wasn't expecting that," Sir Oden marvels.

"I didn't think we had such a skilled archer in our presence," Lex praises.

The stunned soldiers begin lavishing Nady with praise. But all the attention is too much for her. She quickly returns the bow to Sir Oden and runs back to me in escape.

"You're incredible, Nady! The others are nothing compared to YOU!" I exclaim.

"Big Sis is right! Your speed and *thwack* were the best yet!"

"Th-Thank you. It was just a coincidence..." Nady blushes from our enthusiastic praise.

She reacted the same way when I told her she's cute. Maybe she's not used to being complimented. But her tail is softly flicking back and forth, so I think it's safe to say she's happy.

"Hmph. Doesn't matter if you're good at hitting immobile targets."

"Yeah. What matters is if you can take down living prey!"

"Nady can't hit animals even if her life depends on it. I seriously doubt she's Chieftain Theos's *daughter*."

I hear several disgruntled voices on the range. At first I thought it was jealous soldiers, but when I look around it seems to be coming from some of the younger Lucors. They're keeping their voices just quiet enough for Theos not to hear. They are literally talking behind his back. I can't believe they are badmouthing someone from their own tribe. It ticks me off hearing them belittle my friend.

"Excuse me, can you please cut the crap?!" I snap.

"I hate to burst your bubble, but we are only speaking the truth, Miss Priestess." one of the young Lucor males responds with a shrug. He's trying to be as polite as possible with me, but the effect was lost the moment he mocked Nady.

"How can Nady not hit a moving target? Did you see how much better she is at archery than everyone here? Tell them off, Nady!" I say, looking over my shoulder at her for support. She's looking at her hands, her ears and tail drooped like a sad puppy. "Nady..." I repeat.

"...true..." she mutters under her breath, trembling.

"Sorry, I didn't catch that."

"What everyone says is...true. I haven't had a single successful hunt. That's why they call me *useless*..." Nady turns and runs away from the archery range.

"Ah, Nady!"

Calling her name won't stop her now—she's so fast, I doubt she can hear me. She's already out of sight.

We haven't been friends for long. And yet I had to go and get a big head thinking I knew more about her than the people of her tribe. I think my actions just now may have unknowingly hurt her.

...This sucks.

◆ Chapter 8: This Has Happened Before

SHORTLY after the sun rises, I go into the courtyard and deeply inhale until a rush of cold air permeates me from the inside out. I never get sick of doing this first thing in the morning.

“Good morning, Holy Priestess,” greets the soldier standing guard near the outer castle gate. The two soldiers on duty on top of the walls call down the same greeting. I know them all by name and face.

“Gooooood mooorning!” I respond as I stretch.

“You’re up earlier than usual.”

“Yeah, I barely slept.”

There’s one reason why I couldn’t sleep: guilt over hurting Nady’s feelings yesterday. I went after her when she ran away, but failed to find her anywhere. I still haven’t apologized.

“We can’t have you tired. Please rest a while longer,” the soldiers insist.

“Thank you for worrying about me. One day won’t hurt me. Besides, I’m wide awake! I can’t sleep like this, so I’ll just push through the day!”

I need to find Nady and properly apologize. Mind made up, I clench both fists, ready to get the job done within the day.

“Just speaking to you has reenergized us, Holy Priestess!”

“Heck yeah! I could work a forty-eight-hour shift after this chat!”

“I could go a whole three days now!”

“Please, PLEASE, get proper sleep,” I stress. I’m pretty sure they’re just joking, but the people of Grantz tend to have more than a few screws loose, so I’m scared some might actually go through with it.

As I’m enjoying my daily exchange with the soldiers on guard duty, I notice one of the men on the wall is gone. I’m looking up at them from below, so maybe he just entered my blind spot, but the other one disappears as I’m searching for the first.

“Wh-What the? Hey, something’s—”

“Holy Priestess, RUN AW—”

The last soldier couldn't finish his warning. I return my gaze to the gate to find him lying flat on the ground. Someone clad in all black is standing over his body—they look like an assassin at a glance. This is clearly not a situation I can manage alone. I open my mouth to scream when something cold and hard presses against my neck.

“Don't make a sound. We only knocked them unconscious,” someone says in a deep voice behind me. There's still the assassin in front of me, so it looks like this is the work of more than one person.

Actually, this is giving me horrible déjà vu. It's not quite the same as when Iris shoved a bag over my head, but this is probably another...

“We won't hurt you if you behave.”

“Uh, what do you want from me...?” I ask.

“You're coming with us!”

I knew it—another kidnapping!



THEY restrained my arms behind my back and forced me to walk a long distance blindfolded. I went up and down stairs, passed through cold areas where my footsteps echoed, and just when I thought I could finally breathe in outside air, I'm heaved up onto something hard. A horse neighs, and whatever I'm riding in lurches forward.

“...This is a wagon, isn't it? They're incredibly valuable. How did you get one?” I ask my captors.

“I exchanged money and goods for it, just as I did for the services of my hired bodyguards,” answers a different voice from the men who knocked out the soldiers. His tone is calm and non-threatening.

He said he hired these men—he must be the ringleader.

“Would you consider undoing my restraints soon?” I request. “I doubt I can escape your skilled guards anyway.”

“...I'll allow it.”

After a short pause, someone removes the restraints and

blindfold for me. The first thing I see is a middle-aged man. Between the bags under his eyes and his sunken cheeks, he looks deathly tired. Right beside me is the man dressed like an assassin. There's also a coachman at the front of the wagon. Altogether, there are three people involved in my kidnapping.

Less than I thought.

Most of the wagon is covered by a canopy, but I can see out the back through the opening. The royal capital's walls are fading into the distance. It seems we have already traveled a lot of ground since they first kidnapped me.

"Where are we heading?" I ask.

"...Trade City Cladorca."

"That takes us into Torstana. You do realize that Torstana is still overrun by zombies, right?"

"Which is why I have the Holy Priestess accompanying me. You will purify any zombies."

"I'm not accompanying you by choice. You *kidnapped* me."

Particulars aside, I now know what he's after. I mean, that's the obvious reason for anyone to kidnap me. Being abducted so fanatics can worship me as their goddess definitely came out of nowhere.

"I would have preferred it not come to this either. But it's the only way for me to save Cladorca."

"I heard a merchant named Kodbyen requested my assistance from the king. Is that—"

"Me. You know his decision."

I understand the situation now. But abducting a priestess and charging into a zombie-infested city with just two guards doesn't exactly equal *sane* thinking.

"Do you have a reason for taking this big of a risk?"

"I don't have some grand, heroic reason. I just want to save my family. I want to save my wife and son...!" Kodbyen squeezes his hands together until his knuckles turn white. Strong emotion oozes from his every word.

Wanting to save your family is definitely a common, selfish reason that has nothing to do with heroics. But to me, it's the most persuasive reason of all.

Regardless of how war-hungry Torstana is as a nation, the people who lived there are—*were*—just as human as those living in Grantz. There are as many different lifestyles and viewpoints as

there are people. It's not like every citizen is bloodthirsty just because they live there.

I had been struggling with my feelings about this since talking to the king, but I think I was able to sort it out a little thanks to talking with Kodbyen.

"I was actually *for* purifying Torstana. So, I am willing to assist you when I can."

"D-Do you mean that?!" Kodbyen is so surprised and excited, he falls onto his face. I'm a bit overwhelmed by his desperation, but I don't plan on going along with everything he wants.

"Can we turn back first? We can't purify a city with this few people..."

"I heard you purified Grantz's royal capital with just three people."

"We nearly *died!* More than *once*. We only survived because we had a superhuman monster on our side. It was more of a miracle than anything."

"There are no other options available to me." I know that gleam in his eyes. It's the rabid determination of someone who can't be persuaded otherwise. "Grantz's army is already turning over the capital looking for you. I'm certain dozens of squads have been sent out in pursuit. I can't turn back now."

I had the faint hope he would listen to my advice after opening up to me a little, but it was a lost cause.

Ahh...Lex...come get me already!

◆ Chapter 9: Where There's a Fantasy World There's...

THE wagon has been bouncing around for a while now—it's really throwing off my sense of balance. I can't stand the gloomy mood a second longer, so I try to break the ice.

"There's not much flat land in these parts, is there? Must be hard to transport goods."

"That's why peddlers such as myself are invaluable. We should be arriving soon," Kodbyen says as he turns and lifts a corner of the canopy.

I've only seen territories belonging to Grantz since coming to this world. I wonder what Torstana looks like. I lean forward to peek outside when a zombie shoves its head through the opening!

"BWAH!"

"Eeek!"

"AGGH!"

Screaming, I roll back so hard I slam against the other side of the wagon. Kodbyen releases the canopy and falls on his butt. He scoots back as fast as he can from the snapping teeth.

"Wh-When did that get there?! H-Hey! Do *something* about this thing!"

"You don't have to tell me twice!"

The bodyguard was already moving before Kodbyen gave the order. He easily peels the zombie off the wagon by shoving his club in its face. I can hear the zombie hitting the ground and bouncing behind us as the wagon continues without stopping.

"Be careful. I still haven't gotten all the coin you promised me yet," the bodyguard says flatly to Kodbyen as he sits back in his corner.

Meanwhile, Kodbyen still seems to be in shock as he's taking sharp, short breaths.

"You just glimpsed one of the many dangers out here. Why not stop while you still can?" I coax.

"I-I'm doing this for my family. I won't stop over a single

zombie scare!”

I thought it might work this time, but he still won't change his mind. He probably needs a bigger scare.



A while later, the coachman calls out “We’re here” and stops the wagon. After our zombie hitchhiker incident, Kodbyen and I are extra cautious when we exit the wagon.

“Holy smokes...” My cheeks twitch as soon as I’m outside. Not because I’m overwhelmed by Cladorca, a city built into a giant mountain with thick walls surrounding it. No, it’s because of the countless bluish-purple and black dots roaming the massive plain in front of the trade city.

I seriously wish my eyes were playing tricks on me, but all those dots are zombies. There are more than double what I took on at Grantz’s royal capital. At a glance, I can tell there are more than a thousand. We’re probably looking at two or *three* thousand. Considering there’s going to be even more inside the city walls, this plan just got that much dumber.

“Er, Kodbyen? I can only purify a maximum of five hundred people a day...and with these numbers, we won’t have the leeway to care for anyone we purify. Also, food and water are going to become a problem *fast*.”

“I see your point, but I’ve come this far. I will save my family at least.” Kodbyen is blinded by his goal. Trying to save just his family rather than the entire city is a better objective, but still unrealistic.

The guard who finished tying the horse and wagon to a nearby tree voices the same concerns. “Yeah, but do you see how many people there are? Is it even possible to find your family?”

“No worries, we will look with you,” Kodbyen offers.

“Does that ‘we’ include me?” I ask dryly.

“Obviously.”

Of course it does. I figured as much, but it only adds to my misery to hear it. I probably can’t escape with the guards watching me, so my only choice is to do whatever it takes to increase my odds of survival.

“All right, if we’re going to do this, let’s do it right,” I say and

launch into a crash course on zombies. “As I said on the way here, be careful not to come into direct contact with the zombies, or you will be instantly infected. The infection will also spread through anything touching your body such as gloves or clothes. I recommend using a shield and weapons with a long reach. They react to sound as well, so please, don’t make any loud noises.”

“Yeah, yeah. We know,” the two bodyguards gruffly reply, a shield in their left hand and a club in their right. They don’t hesitate to walk toward the zombie-infested plains.

I hear one scoffing, “Normos couldn’t catch me with my pants down.” The other snorts.

They’re completely underestimating the situation. There’s no question that the bodyguards are quite strong because they easily knocked out the castle soldiers, but their opponent this time is a plain crawling with zombies. Not only do zombies smell worse than rotten eggs in the sun, but they are a supernatural creature beyond human understanding that’s capable of causing *instant* decay in anyone they touch. You shouldn’t let down your guard even with the normal ones.

Or at least that’s what I thought...

“Wow!”

The search for Kodbyen’s family has officially begun. His bodyguards keep the zombies in check like it’s a walk in the park for them. They carve a path through the horde by shoving aside zombies with their shield and knocking them back with their club. Maybe I overestimated the danger. The guards also took my tip about noise to heart and are advancing while making the bare minimum amount of sound.

“No offense, but we ain’t as weak as some wee *girly*,” one of the burly guards says, mocking me.

My strength is indeed paltry compared to trained bodyguards in a war-torn world. But I’ve survived for three months in a world that only had zombies when I first arrived—their disrespect irks me.

But, contrary to my growing displeasure, our trek through the plain is proceeding smoothly. The city gates are still far away, but I can make out their shape now.

“Our path inside the city is practically secure now,” Kodbyen says, relief creeping into his quiet voice.

ROOOAAAARRRR!

He spoke too soon. A deep, rumbling noise shakes the ground,

causing my ears to ring and my stomach to twist in knots. The lingering, changing notes sound as if they came from some sort of giant beast. I shudder. Unable to ignore it, the bodyguards rake their eyes over the plains in search of the source.

“What made that sound...?”

“L-Look! The zombies are actin’ funny!”

Every zombie is staring at us. Even the zombies on the other side of the plain react to the sound and stagger toward us.

“What’s gotten into them?! They weren’t paying attention to us before!”

The bodyguards might’ve underestimated the zombies, but they kept their numbers in check by reducing noise to a minimum. So how did we attract *every* zombie here?

“What’s goin’ on?! This wasn’t part of our deal!” one of the bodyguards yells.

“I d-didn’t know this would happen...!” Kodbyen argues.

“Dammit! There’s too many! U-URGGHH!”

One of the zombies lunged onto the bodyguard’s back. He quickly dislodges it, but it’s too late. His body instantly turns bluish-purple and exudes the heinous odor of a zombie.

“Killing is our only option!” The last remaining bodyguard draws his sword.

He plans to get out of this by *killing* zombies. They might be rotting fleshbags right now, but they will return to being human if I purify them. In other words, killing zombies is the same as murdering sick people. I can’t let him do that. I’m about to stop him when the zombies take care of it for me.

“AGH! Let go! URK! My arm! My aaaarrrrrrmmm!”

It takes just one second for zombification to spread through the body. Sadly, another bodyguard has joined the undead. We only progressed through the horde because the bodyguards were keeping the immediate zombies at bay. Without them, there’s no searching for Kodbyen’s family, much less getting out of here alive.

“Time to run, Kodbyen!”

“Not yet! We can keep going if you purify them!”

“They’re goners! We’re gonna join them soon if we don’t get outta here!”

“F-Fine...!”

Persuading him in my firmest voice did the trick. He reluctantly agrees to leave. We both look back to see if we can

return by the path we came. Unfortunately, we can't even take the first step toward escape.

"Crud! They filled in behind us!"

Zombies have come for us from every direction. We're completely surrounded. I survey the area but there's no escape route left. It doesn't matter how slow daytime zombies are if there's no space for us to run without bumping into them.

"D-Do something! Aren't you the Priestess?!"

"I would if I could ...!"

The zombie ring tightens around us as we argue. One of the more spry zombies crouches, its hip bones creaking, and jumps over the rest. There's no space or time left. Survival at the front of my mind, I thrust out my right hand, pushing back the zombie's shoulder. Bright light engulfs the area as the zombie reverts.

"Wh-What happened to—aah! What's wrong with you people?! Shit! Go away! URGHHH!"

"I'm so sorry...!"

Zombies grab and pull down the dezombified man, instantly reinfecting him. This is the *worst* situation to purify people. It'll only end in eternally traumatizing them. But if I do nothing, it'll be my life that ends!

Please...someone...Lex! Help me!

My escape sealed, I plead for rescue in my heart and, almost in answer, I hear hooves pounding the ground and a loud bray. It's coming from the same path we took to get here.

"Lady Mizuha!"

"Lex!"

He came for me! Lex is riding Vianta, his trusty horse, through the zombie horde.

"Come and get me, zombie scum!" he shouts to draw their attention. He tries to charge through the wall of bodies, but Vianta rears up on her hind legs in protest. Lex promptly dismounts and slaps her on the side, letting her escape the way they came. Then he plows through the zombies with his shield out.

His onrush sends him hurtling through the wall, even if it doesn't have the same strength as one of Sir Oden's charges. He rushes to my side while sending moaning zombies flying.

"I'm sorry for being late, m'lady!"

"You aren't late! You're just in time!"

Lex can be too serious and embarrassing at times, but he

always comes to save me when it counts. I'm too embarrassed to ever say it out loud, but I'll proudly think it: I wouldn't expect any less of my knight in shining armor!

"Please stay right behind me, Lady Mizuha! We're withdrawing!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Mr. Kodbyen, I have much to say to you. But escape is our *top* priority. Please follow me without complaint!"

"F-Fine..."

We cut a path through the zombies with Lex as our vanguard. It's hard to tell if we're even making forward progress because, for every zombie that goes down, three more takes its place. The pressure is worse than ever with the loudest "BWAH! BWAH!" chorus egging us on.

ACK! A zombie grabbed Lex's left arm. Zombie decay rapidly spreads up his arm, but I slap my hand on his back, stopping it. I'm walking within inches of Lex's back right now. I can purify him at a moment's notice, unlike the bodyguards who stood too far away.

"Don't worry. I'll keep my hand on your back!" I shout over the zombie moans.

"Thank you, m'lady! I rode ahead of the troops, so backup should be here soon!"

Did he ride ahead just to save me? I'm so happy, but regrettably, being surrounded by death doesn't let me savor the moment. I press together my almost-smiling lips and keep pace with Lex.

"Just a little further and we're out!"

Not long after Lex says that, I see the end of the zombie ring. I run through it right behind him. At last, I'm outside the zombie horde.

I didn't have the leisure of worrying about someone else, but it looks like Kodbyen made it safely behind us. He trips out of the horde, just barely rolling out of reach of the zombies.

Even now an insane number of zombies are lumbering toward us. Fortunately, they're as slow as the typical daytime zombie. They won't catch us as long as we run. I can finally breathe easy.

ROOOAAAARRRR!

"There it is again! Last time we heard this, every zombie came after us..." I tell Lex.

"This unsettling feeling in my chest reminds me of the first

time we encountered the black fog.”

Now that he mentions it—I don’t have time to finish that thought. A massive shadow lands in front of me with an earthshaking thud. The impact causes the ground to shake so hard that I lose my balance. The zombie horde falls over like dominos while moaning.

What in the world just happened? I can feel fear twisting my face as I take a second look at the shadow. Something terrifyingly *huge* is in front of me.

It’s probably the size of ten Boneless Hams put together. The shape is similar to a lizard. But there’s a lot about it that’s different from a lizard. Spine-tingling black horns jut off the top of its head and rows of deadly fangs peek out from its large mouth.

Each of the four feet supporting its heavy body is equipped with a set of sinisterly sharp claws. It also has a long, thick, serrated tail capable of flinging a person away as if they were a fly. The most ridiculous part of all is the wings on its back—they’re large enough to encircle its entire body and still be long enough to fly.

“Say...Lex? Is *that* a...normal creature in this world?”

“...No. But I know of something similar that appears in many stories and legends.”

Barring those rotten scales, this is undeniably a dragon.



◆ Chapter 10: Of Course, It Has That Attack

THE dragon unfurls its mighty wings and opens its maw. The ensuing ROOOAAAARRRR shakes every bone in my body.

“This is the same sound as before!” Lex shouts.

“Then this dragon is *controlling* the zombies?”

“Probably! But I have to say—”

“It *STINKS!*” I cry out the same time Lex does. We’re both pinching our noses. Besides being the most chilling thing I’ve seen yet, the dragon’s breath excretes an overpowering stench. It reeks more than any zombie I’ve ever encountered.

But we can’t afford to be pinching our noses right now. The dragon lifts its right forefoot to crush us. I run to the left, with Lex pulling my arm. Kodbyen also succeeds in dodging it by a hair as he tumbles out of the way screaming “AAAAHHHHH!”

We somehow managed to avoid being squashed. But we just threw ourselves out of the frying pan and into the fire—the zombie horde is to our left and right. Even more zombies are sluggishly closing in behind us. There is no escaping to the left, right, or rear.

“Please don’t tell me we have to...”

“...Escape by going past the dragon,” Lex finishes for me.

“Ugh. Why is my first guess always *right*...?”

Getting through the dragon’s legs poses a huge risk. There’s not much space, and I can’t shake the feeling it’ll just smush us under its big chest. Then the dragon raises its left forefoot to crush us while we’re talking.

Lex pulls me away just in time. He draws his sword and strikes back, but the blade bounces off the dragon’s black scales with a *clang*. If Lex can’t cut through it, then it must have an extremely tough hide.

“If that doesn’t work on you, then try this!” he shouts, chucking a canteen he removed from his belt at the dragon. “How do you like the taste of Lady Mizuha’s holy water?!”

“I keep telling you not to call it *mine!*” I complain as Lex swiftly runs his sword through the spot on the dragon’s left leg

where the holy water splattered.

The tough hide splits open and a bluish-purple fluid gushes out. He clearly hurt it, but the dragon doesn't even flinch.

"Crud! It didn't help!"

"That didn't do the trick either?!"

Zombies are already within two or three steps of us. Kodbyen and I both squeak out pathetic yelps.

"Carving a path through them is the only way out!" I yell.

"No, m'lady, there is still hope!"

"What hope?!"

"Here it comes!"

A loud THWUNK comes from the dragon's left wing. Straining my eyes, I see an arrow falling, having lost its momentum on impact. Where did that come from?

Dozens of arrows fly past me faster than I can piece together the situation. *THWACKS* echo through the area as the arrows strike the dragon's torso. My eyes are drawn in the direction the arrows came from.

There I find around thirty soldiers from Grantz's Royal Army. Around twenty beastmen are riding alongside them on short horses. It's mostly the beastmen who are armed with bows and arrows.

"Why did the Lucors come with Grantz's soldiers?" I ask.

"They came to repay their debt to you, Lady Mizuha!"

It's true I purified them, but I didn't expect anything in return, much less that they would brave the danger to save me. Even now, they hold themselves to a high standard. I can never be grateful enough.

Led by Chieftain Theos, the Lucors continue shooting at the dragon, but its hide is too tough—not a single arrow pierces it. Luckily, the attack redirects the dragon's attention, creating an opening in front of us.

"Now!"

I start running with Lex and finally escape the zombie threat. All that's left is to get away from the dragon. Vianta responds to Lex's whistling and gallops through the trees toward us. I'm always amazed by her intelligence. Lex jumps on Vianta's back and holds out his hand to me.

"Your hand, Lady Mizuha!"

"Take it!" Just as I'm about to place my hand on his, the dragon roars again. Spooked, Vianta stomps the ground and snorts,

causing Lex's hand to pull away from me.

"Run away, Holy Priestess!"

Theos's shout of warning informs me of the impending danger. I instinctively turn around—the dragon is coming right at me with its jaws wide open. Worse yet, something like a black miasma swirls in its mouth.

Of course, if there are dragons, they'll obviously have *THAT* attack.

"Lady Mizuha!" Lex reaches for me, but Vianta leaps sideways, creating a bigger gap between us.

The dragon spews the mass of fiery miasma out of its mouth. If only it was just spraying a foul odor on me like a skunk, then I might survive with a humiliating stench as the only damage I take. Alas, black flames are carving out the ground as they rush toward me. It looks like this is the end of the line for me.

"Mizuha!"

Just as the black flames engulf my vision, I hear someone call my name. I jerk my head toward the voice and a tall girl quickly moves into view—my friend, Nady. She scoops me into her arms and sits me in front of her on the horse.

The black flames miss the horse's tail by a literal hair. It was a really close call. My heart hammers in my ears—I nearly died this time. I doubt my heart will shut up anytime soon, but it can wait. I look over my shoulder and anxiously ask, "Why are you here, Nady?"

"I don't need a special reason to help a *friend*!"

"...But I hurt your feelings."

"You did nothing wrong, Mizuha. It's my weakness that brought it on. Anyway, escaping comes first!"

"Yeah, I totally agree!" I lean forward in the saddle to better assess our surroundings.

As soon as Lex rescues Kodbyen, he bellows, "Retreat!" Grantz's soldiers and the Lucors begin withdrawing down the path away from the zombie-infested Cladorca.

Zombies can't keep up with horses during the daytime. Now we can gallop away to safety...is what I'd like to think, but the dragon has other plans. If that wasn't bad enough, it's coming straight at me. The ground trembles as its heavy feet bring it closer.

"It's after Lady Mizuha! Please hurry!" Lex shouts.

"Hang on tight so you don't fall off, Mizuha!" Nady kicks the

horse into a full gallop, distancing us from the dragon—but not for long. The dragon rises into the air using the wings it had been flapping for fun this whole time.

“Fill it with arrows, men! Protect the Holy Priestess by distracting the dragon!”

Theos’s steely voice inspires the Lucor people to wisely keep shooting. Sadly, the dragon is still intent on us. I’m confident it’s instinctively attracted to the Goddess’s powers in me.

“Nady, I’m pretty sure that dragon is just after me, so—”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence!” Nady says over me, her full concentration dedicated to keeping our horse running when the dragon blasts more miasma flames at us.

Though we barely dodged a direct hit, the flames slam into the ground directly behind us. It generates tremendous wind pressure as it gouges the earth. Our horse is knocked over by the blast, tossing us out of the saddle in the process. I hit the ground rolling.

“Are you all right, Mizuha?!”

“Oww... I’m alive at least. What about you—”

“I’m also all—” Nady’s voice cuts off. She was interrupted by a tremendously loud BAM.

The dragon landed nearby—less than ten feet away. It roars. Fear paralyzes me, rendering me speechless.

Nady, unlike me, springs into action. She takes up her bow and quickly nocks an arrow. She’s ready to release it at any time, but doesn’t. Looking closer, I notice her arms are shaking twice as much as mine.

“Nady, shoot it!” Theos bellows.

His voice does nothing to move the arrow from her bow. Seeing its opening, the roaring dragon snaps its jaws at us. Its breath is *rank*. My fear of impending death outweighs the foul stench.

I’m really a goner this time. It’s gonna eat me!

Or so I thought until the dragon turns its snapping jaws away and takes flight—it’s leisurely flying back toward Cladorca.

“It’s letting us live...?” My jaw drops. What in the world is going on? Questions flood my mind, but even greater relief washes over me.

“Lady Mizuha! Are you hurt?!” Lex rides over on Vianta.

“Nope. I’m okay aside from a few bumps and bruises. Nady saved me.”

“I didn’t do a *single* thing. I couldn’t do *anything* at all!” Nady sinks her sharp teeth into her lower lip.

She seems vexed she couldn’t shoot the dragon when push came to shove. I place my hand over her tightly balled fists.

“That’s not true. I would be a splattered smudge on the bottom of the dragon’s foot about now if you hadn’t come for me, Nady.”

“Lady Mizuha speaks the truth. You have my utmost gratitude for saving her, Lady Nady.”

I express my heartfelt gratitude alongside Lex.

“I guess so,” Nady mutters, unconvinced.

Lex looks out across the troops who have stopped near us and raises his voice for all to hear. “We don’t know when the dragon will come back. Let’s withdraw and return to the royal capital immediately.”

◆ Chapter 11: Too Soon to Relax

“**PLEASE** understand this: you are this world’s hope—the only person who can save it. Your safety is our top priority. Please keep me in attendance at all times, including your morning walks, Lady Mizuha.”

“If you insist...” I reluctantly agree.

“Although things are calmer than before, the threat has not completely disappeared yet. Many of our soldiers are stationed around the capital,” Lex continues his lecture. “But due to the lack of manpower, the castle isn’t perfectly protected compared to normal times, so please be cautious.”

“I know. I’ve taken it to heart...”

After returning to the royal capital from Cladorca, things became hectic with Cia weeping in my arms, taking a much-needed bath, and showing my face to the king. I finally got some personal time after a night’s sleep—or so I thought until Lex greeted me first thing in the morning with a lecture. He caught me on my way to the courtyard for my daily morning walk.

Now I’m being scolded endlessly in a corner of the courtyard. My lack of caution was partially responsible for what happened, so I quietly nod along with his scolding until it suddenly stops. Wondering what happened, I raise my head and am greeted by Lex’s terribly relieved smile.

“Everything else aside, I am truly relieved you are safe.”

Lex’s nagging comes from a place of concern for me. I’m willing to obediently listen to his scolding because I know that.

“...Thank you. I’m happy you came for me, Lex.”

“I wish I could have saved you sooner, m’lady.”

“You hurried ahead of everyone else and arrived when I needed you most. That’s all that matters.” He speaks of his quick arrival as if it wasn’t a big deal, but I’m certain he pushed himself to the brink to make it in time. My knight is just that kind of man. “By the way, what happened to Kodbyen?”

“He was thrown in prison upon our return.”

“Well, that’s a good place for him. It doesn’t matter if he did it for his family, kidnapping is still a crime.”

“...You speak of it with such indifference. I wouldn’t believe you were the person he kidnapped. Aren’t you angry?”

“Of course I’m *angry*. But I just can’t hate him after hearing his reason. Everyone wants to save their family. Even I would prioritize my family’s purification if they were zombies.”

My family means the world to me—from my parents who are so lovey-dovey it’s embarrassing to my brother who’s a bit of a dolt for secretly buying magazines to learn how to be cooler for his college debut. Just imagining them being gone makes me sad and lonely.

“At least now I’ve lost the desire to go purify Cladorca as long as *that* thing’s there.” I shudder.

“You mean the dragon? It is a serious threat. I never even considered such a creature existed.”

“Right? I thought it was just a fantasy creature.”

“That said, it seems highly likely that the dragon is a collection of animals like the zombie you call Boneless Ham.”

“Ugh. I can totally see that being the case... Maybe it’s like a combination of zombie birds?”

“There’s a good possibility of that with it having wings.”

If our theory is right, then a lot of zombie birds had to have combined to create the sheer size of that dragon. I’d rather not see a bunch of birds covered in pink mucus falling from the sky after purifying it—sounds like a bad horror movie!

Lex peers into my eyes as I’m shuddering at the thought of it. “I have something I wish to tell you, Lady Mizuha.”

“Where did the sudden formality come from? Do you want time off or something? Feel free to ask for it then. Oh, but find me another guard first—”

“No, that isn’t what I want to discuss! Besides, I have no intention of ever leaving your side, m’lady.”

I never know what to do with him because he suavely says things like “I have no intention of ever leaving your side.” I’m sure it just comes from him being a knight, but *still*!

“Uh? Um...I-I see. Th-Then what do you want?” I ask again.

Lex straightens up and faces me with a serious gleam in his eyes. “Grantz Kingdom may not be supportive, but I want to aid you in any way I can. So please tell me when you need my help.”

My mouth falls open. Lex is a Royal Knight—he needs to put his king and kingdom first. I always thought he felt that way too. So I feel as if the rug was pulled out from under my feet when he phrases it in such a way it sounds like he’s saying “You’re more important to me than my kingdom.”

“You’ve changed, Lex.”

“You think so?”

“Hmm, maybe not. I’m not too sure. You might’ve been like this from the day I met you.”

“Should I be happy about that?”

“You can be. I mean it as a compliment.”

“Then I shall take it as one!”

People with beautiful faces are the worst—a single smile can bring you to your knees. Even worse, my face has been on fire ever since he said I’m more important. This has been happening a lot lately. If this keeps up, I won’t be able to look at Lex’s face anymore.

Hoping he won’t catch on, I feign calm and look away. “But I’m not even sure where to start with Cladorca. There’s a huge zombie horde, not to mention an angry dragon.”

“I also do not know the best way to handle the zombies, but I do have an idea about how to tackle the dragon. However, it isn’t a comfortable plan...”

“Really? I’m up for trying anything that has even a slight chance of working.”

Lex puzzles his brow for a long moment before finally looking like he made up his mind. “I suppose,” he murmurs.

“So what’s your idea?”

“Asking the woman responsible for summoning the Dark Djinn—Miss Jela.”

My stomach ties in a knot from his shocking suggestion as Jela’s disturbing conduct floods my mind. He wasn’t kidding when he said it isn’t a comfortable plan.

It gives me more despair than hope.

◆ Chapter 12: Someone Worse than a Zombie

“PLEASE watch your step, m’lady.”

“Wow. It feels like a ghost is just waiting to jump out at us...”

I’m currently visiting the castle dungeons with Lex. Security is tight because this is where they keep the worst criminals locked up. Soldiers are stationed not only at the entrance but also at the bottom of the long staircase.

The layout is simple, with many cells lining both sides of the straight passage. Every cell is separated by thick bars and even thicker walls, so it seems unlikely anyone can escape. It seems safe down here, but I still can’t shake the uneasiness creeping in on me because of the lack of light.

I stick as close as possible to Lex as he heads deeper inside the dungeon without any hesitation.

“Pino was experimenting on zombies down here, right? Does that mean...?”

“Please set your mind at ease for there are no more zombies.”

“What a relief! My heart might stop if I don’t prepare myself first.”

Just as I exhale a sigh of relief, something bangs against the cell bars to my right.

“SKRIEEEEEEEE!”

“GAH! You lied! There are zombies!”

It scared a scream right out of me. Something with deathly pale skin and bulging eyeballs shoves its head in the space between the bars, its long, ratty, black hair swaying as it tries to get closer to me.

“Calm down and take a closer look, Lady Mizuha. It’s Miss Jela.”

“Who’re you callin’ a zombie, huh?! Your eyes must have decayed for you to confuse the world’s most beautiful woman for a hideous zombie!”

The zombie—also known as Jela—continues to bang its head

against the bars. She's a hundred times scarier than any zombie! And more violent too!

"BWAH! BWAAAAHHH!"

"Eeeek!"

"I suggest you cease intimidating Lady Mizuha." Lex draws his sword and points it at her forehead.

Jela seems unafraid, although she grudgingly moves away from the bars as if she doesn't want a scratch on her face. Once she settles on the simple bed inside the cell, she glares up at us. "What'd you come here for?"

Jela no longer has the Dark Djinn's power. Despite knowing that, she still has a crazy intensity about her that *terrifies* me. Clenching my fists, I muster my deflating courage.

"Um, we visited the Trade City Cladorca located in Torstana yesterday and a dragon attacked us there."

"Heh. What about it?"

"Well, you are the person who summoned the Dark Djinn and started the zombie apocalypse, right? I thought you might know the dragon's weakness."

"You think I'd tell you if I knew? Are you *dumb*?! Has your brain rotted?" I can't argue with that one. To Jela, I'm the pest who destroyed her "happy life with the king." There's no way she'll willingly help us.

"Th-Then what do I need to do for you to answer?" I ask.

"It's simple: let me out and I'll tell you *everything*."

"That is one deal we cannot make," Lex answers in my place.

Jela seems aware she was asking for the impossible. She snorts, not the least bit depressed by it. "Looks like that's it for our negotiations then. Now shoo."

"Please help us, Jela."

"Seeking pity from me is a waste of time, girl."

Apparently it won't be easy to get an answer out of her. It's my fault for coming without a better plan, but I guess that's as far as I get today. I'll have to come back later—or so I thought.

"I was hoping to save this for later, but you have forced my hand," Lex says, reaching for the bag hanging over his shoulder.

He left saying he had to prepare some things before going to the dungeon and came back with that bag. I didn't think much of it at the time, but did he fetch something to intimidate her with? Like torture devices? Lex is the last person I'd expect that from though.

What Lex pulls out of the bag puts my trepidation to shame for how unexpected and anticlimactic it is.

It's an undertunic made of what looks like a very silky and expensive material. Too large to be a gift made for Jela. What in the world is Lex thinking? Jela's suspicious gaze narrows on him.

"What is that supposed to do for me? You aren't going to tell me to use it as a change of clothes, are you? Don't mock me. I might be imprisoned, but I haven't fallen that low—wait, this SCENT...it *can't* be!"

"Oh, but it is. His Majesty wore this."

GA-THUNK! Jela slammed her face into the bars. She sniffs the air, not caring about the blood dripping down her forehead.

"Gimme! Give it to me right now! HURRY!"

"Tell us about the dragon first."

Lex pulls back the undertunic, keeping it out of reach of her outstretched hands. Red splotches her pallid skin. She's visibly enraged. I'm more than a little repulsed by how fast she lunged at the bars for the king's clothes like some sort of animal.

"To be clear, I don't know much. I didn't create the dragon. I can only make an educated guess about it."

"That's good enough," Lex responds.

Jela slinks back to the bed, drops down on it with a heavy thud, and starts to tell us about it, sounding extremely annoyed as she does. "I intentionally created the giant and mud zombies, but that doesn't make them special."

"Meaning?" I ask, confused.

"There are also unique zombies that occur naturally," Lex deduces.

Apparently he was right because Jela continues without denying it. "It's been a long time since the world began to decay—it's not strange for such creatures to come into existence without my knowledge. That dragon formed without my involvement."

"So there could be even more unique zombies crawling around out there? Ugghh..."

Aside from the humanoid zombies, I always thought the unique zombie types were created by Jela too—not natural mutations. The Boneless Hams are dangerous enough... This is the worst-case scenario.

"This is what you get for taking that man from me. I hope you suffer *miserably*," she hisses.

“No, *you’re* the one who abducted him—”

“Abducted him?! Don’t screw with the facts! He belonged to me *first*! Got it?! She—that Lia woman—stole him from me! BWAAAAH!”

“Eek!”

Jela slams her whole body against the bars. Screaming, I retreat behind Lex’s back. Seriously, this woman is scarier than any zombie!

“Knight! I told you what you wanted, now give me what’s mine!”

“Is there anything else you can tell us?”

“I told you from the start that my knowledge is limited! Now, gimme! Gimme! *Gimme! SKRIEEEE!*”

“A-All right. Take it.” Lex passes the king’s undertunic through the bars, and Jela violently snatches it. She’s like a wild beast. Actually, she’s scarier and grosser than any beast.

“Aah...my beloved’s *smell!*”

Weeping, Jela hugs the undertunic to her. She presses her face in it, kisses it, nibbles on it, and starts doing other perverted things with it. I can’t help feeling like this is going to go in a bad direction if we leave it with her.

“Hey, Lex? Is it okay to leave her like that?”

“I simply gave her something His Majesty was going to throw away anyway.”

I guess that’s okay then. What would the king think if he knew his underclothes were being used this way? He’s better off never knowing. It was sacrificed to save the world.

“Still didn’t learn its weakness,” I say, sighing.

We’ve left the dungeon and have returned to the castle’s first floor. We walk side by side down the corridor with no destination in mind.

“I apologize for not being of better assistance, m’lady.”

“It’s not your fault, Lex. Besides, we learned something we didn’t know about the zombies, so it was still beneficial.” We just have to search for another way.

As we’re chatting, a boy I know well walks around the corner. He’s wearing a hat and green clothes. He’s Pino, Grantz’s royal scholar.

“Ah!” Lex and I both utter in surprise. He must have arrived at

the same thought I did. I don't know why we didn't think of it sooner.

Pino frowns suspiciously. "Wh-What? Why are you both gawking at me?"

"Found him! The best person to consult!"

◆ Chapter 13: A Scholar You Can Depend On

PINO shows us into one of the rooms in the castle that was set aside specifically for him. Obviously, it isn't as spacious or luxurious as Cia's quarters, but it's more than extravagant to a commoner like me.

Lex and I sit on the sofa Pino directs us to. He heaves an audibly annoyed sigh as he plants himself on the sofa opposite us.

"Do you view me as some kind of convenient human encyclopedia?"

"I wouldn't dare! We think of you as a *dependable* scholar. Right, Lex?"

"Yes! As Lady Mizuha says, there is no one more dependable than you, Master Pino."

"Sir Lex is believable, but...I smell someone trying to butter me up." Skepticism gleams in his narrowed eyes. I'm hurt he can't trust a compliment from me, but I'll settle for him being willing to hear us out.

"You wanted to consult me, yes? Surely you aren't here to ask me to help you with the dragon."

"Wow! How did you know?"

"...I receive reports from your expeditions too."

"I wouldn't expect anything less of the king's master scholar!"

He answers my unfiltered praise with a loud sigh. "It sounds near-invincible from what I've heard. Arrows didn't work on it either, right?"

"Yeah. Thick scales cover its tough hide—not a single arrow the Lucors shot punctured it."

"However," Lex interrupts, "my sword cut through the area softened by Lady Mizuha's holy water."

"That's Miss Priestess's holy water for you. The effects are always outstanding."

"You know, every time you praise the holy water, I can't help feeling like it's a dig at me..."

“Aren’t you just being overly sensitive about it? I, at least, mean it as a *heartfelt* compliment.”

“I do as well, Lady Mizuha!”

Lex I believe, but Pino definitely does not mean it that way. His wicked expression with the slight upward curve of his lips is saying, “See, you get it.” I knew he wasn’t complimenting me.

“I expected as much, but since your holy water worked, it proves that the dragon was born from the Dark Djinn’s power and your Holy Priestess powers are still effective as a countermeasure,” Pino says, returning to the more serious topic at hand.

“Lex is one thing, but I can’t get close enough to touch the dragon.”

“I barely found an opening without getting trampled,” Lex admits in a vexed voice.

Come to think of it, the dragon rampaged more than any Boneless Ham. Maybe I could pull it off if it was weakened, but I doubt I can approach it when it has that much energy. Even if I was capable of it, I’m confident I’ll be too paralyzed with fear to move.

Pino doesn’t show an ounce of concern compared to Lex and me—he actually looks sure of himself. “All you have to do is get close while it’s weak,” he says.

“It’s finding its weakness that’s giving us so much trouble,” I counter.

“You discovered your attacks work with a sprinkle of holy water. It isn’t necessary to fight in close-combat.”

“How are we going to douse it with holy water without getting close?”

“Just alter your arrows to release holy water on impact. Word about the zombie birds has reached me as well, so I already came up with an anti-air countermeasure. All I have to do is tweak it a bit to work on dragons.”

“That’s my Pino! You get the job done fast!”

Pino doesn’t toot his own horn—he merely snorts. The existence of zombie birds is a real nuisance, but who would have thought they would be useful in coming up with a countermeasure against dragons! We’re in luck this time.

Lex is frowning while I’m rejoicing over the small win. “But we still have to worry about whether we can actually hit a flying target.”

“You don’t have to worry on that front. After all, we already

have access to master archers.”

“Ah!” Lex and I utter in unison. It’s always like this whenever we speak with Pino. Those “master archers” have to be the Lucors.

“The dragon isn’t your *only* problem though, is it?”

“Ah, it figures you already heard about the massive zombie horde.”

“I guessed it before I heard it,” Pino says. “In any event, it isn’t wise to take on thousands when you can only purify so many a day.”

We also can’t look after the people we do purify while we’re surrounded by so many zombies. Taking our time to purify smaller numbers is the best plan.

Lex places his hand on his chin, his brow weighed heavily with other concerns. “But it will be next to impossible to fight the dragon while trying to avoid the horde.”

“Yeah, but it also won’t be an easy task to purify the zombies first,” I say. “I bet the dragon will attack us again if we enter too deep into its territory.”

Lex and I have fallen into pensive thought once more after tossing up more potential obstacles. Usually, this is always when Pino will scoff and provide us with a resolution—except, this time he’s eyeing me with a grave expression.

“Hello? Earth to Pino? Don’t you have a plan?”

“I do, but you will try to enact it if I tell you.”

Now I understand why he didn’t immediately tell me his idea. I sit up straight and look him square in the eye. “I will, since that is what I came here for,” I answer seriously.

“You are vital to the continued existence of this world. I have no reason to send you into the heart of danger.”

Valid logic. I also came prepared for him to say something like that. That said, I’m incapable of persuading him through sound debate. I have but one option now that it’s come to this—I slap my hands together and raise them over my bowed head in supplication.

“Please! I’m begging you!”

“You and your begging,” he huffs.

“I’ll bring Cia with me to see you next time.”

“Wh-Why would you bring Her Highness into this?!” he sputters.

“Of course because of certain reasons?” I crack open an eye and spy on Pino. He’s reacting just as I expected: panicking so bad

it's a waste of his perfect poker face.

“What reasons are those, Lady Mizuha?” Lex asks.

“*Special* ones. You see—”



“W-Wait! Fine! I’ll cooperate with you!”

I can’t win against Pino in most things, but I have the upper hand when it comes to this one matter. Delighted everything went perfectly according to plan, I flash Pino a devious grin.

“Thanks, Pino!”

“...I have never doubted your title as *Holy Priestess* as much as I do right now.”

“Hey, I’ve told you a million times,” I say, preparing my best retort for Pino’s hateful glare, “I’m an ordinary high school girl.”



“**DO** you understand why Cladorca was built in that location?” Pino asks.

“Because it’s a good spot for trading with Grantz?” I venture.

“Is it not because it is an easy location to defend from enemy invasion?” Lex speculates.

After obtaining Pino’s cooperation through cheap—smart tactics, he immediately started breaking down the strategy for purifying Cladorca.

“Wrong,” he explains as he points at the map spread out on the table. “While both of those hold true in some sense, they aren’t the fundamental reason. It’s the Bebetor Mountain Range behind the city that deserves our attention: an abundant water spring bubbles right near where Cladorca was built.”

“Ugh, that doesn’t bode well for me.”

“Good for you, Miss Priestess, you guessed it before I said it.”

Nothing good about that.

“Cladorca survives off this spring,” Pino continues. “But like I initially explained, it produces an overabundance of water—enough to flood the entire city if released. Thus, Cladorca built floodgates near the spring’s source to control it.”

“...I think I see where you are going with this. We can release the purified spring water into Cladorca, flooding the region,” Lex surmises.

“Correct.” Pino nods.

“But the water won’t stop coming, right? Am I gonna have to purify all of it until the city is flooded...?”

“I like that idea. You will just have to keep spitting into the

water until you turn into a dried-up husk.” Pino sneers.

“No way! Not happening! Not in a *million* years, buddy! I’ll disgrace myself as a human being long before my mouth dries out!”

“I’m kidding. Relax.”

“...Huh? How so?”

I mean, I’m glad he’s kidding, but I’m not sure what the alternative is.

“Naturally, we will still need your assistance, but this should drastically reduce the load on you.” Pino brings a tall box from the back of the room. He places it on the table and opens the lid. Inside is a flower with four pure-white petals inserted in a glass vase.

“Isn’t this the holy flower?” I ask.

“This is what you went to view the other day, right, Lady Mizuha?” Lex says, peering into the box.

“What’s this got to do with anything?” I look at Pino.

He sets the lid aside and settles back on the sofa. “Considering the time it first appeared, it is extremely likely this flower grew from your holy powers. Based on that, I came up with the theory it may also possess purifying abilities—”

“Does it?! DOES IT?!” I lean forward, hopeful.

“It does not.”

“It doesn’t?!”

I was super hopeful that I could finally graduate from being the Holy Priestess of Spit—this is a major letdown.

“You got my hopes up for nothing!”

“Don’t be so depressed. I discovered it has the *fascinating* ability to stop rot and decay,” Pino casually informs me. I nearly missed the point because he said it with barely any inflection.

“Wait, isn’t that an amazing find?”

“Yes, it is amazing. You can view it as having the power to strengthen or maintain the effects of holy water. The effects were lost when zombies stepped on it, but it can stop natural decay.”

“In other words, after purifying the area around the spring source, all we have to do is maintain it with Holy Flowers...” Lex mutters, catching on to what Pino was alluding to.

Pino smirks. “Now you don’t need to use as much saliva.”

I would have preferred an alternative that doesn’t involve any saliva at all, but at least now I can maintain some dignity. I smile at Lex and share in this joyful moment with him.

“We still have to work out the finer details, but that’s the

general gist of my strategy.”

“I knew I could count on you, Pino! Thank you so much!”

“You have my utmost gratitude as well, Master Pino!”

“It’s too early to rejoice. To be clear, the two of you are incapable of pulling this off alone. Cooperation with Grantz Kingdom is *essential*,” Pino states matter-of-factly, pulling Lex and I down from cloud nine. That problem is arguably the hardest one I have to face right now.

“...Yeah, I know.”

“How will you do it? His Majesty won’t fall for your cheap tricks.”

“I’ll figure that one out on my own. It’s something I have to do myself.”

It’s not like I came to this world of my own volition with a list of things I wanted to do. But things are different now. I’ve discovered what I want to do here, and I postponed my return to my world because of it. I have to solve this problem not as the Holy Priestess, but as an individual.

Sensing my resolve, Pino suddenly laughs. “Looks like I was being meddlesome for nothing. I will prepare things on my end while you handle yours.”

“Okay. You can count on me—to help you with Cia.”

“Wha?! I wasn’t talking about that!” Pino’s eyes dart away, his face redder than a tomato.

Beside me, Lex cocks his head, demonstrating just how dense he really is.

At any rate, Pino has helped us figure out a strategy. Right now he is so flustered, it makes his usual poker face seem like a thing of the past, but my opinion of him hasn’t changed since the day we met.

He truly is a scholar I can depend on.

◆ Chapter 14: Zombies and Strategies

I want to dedicate my time to Cladorca and our newest threat—the dragon—but the normal zombies aren't interested in waiting until it's convenient for me. After parting ways with Pino, I hurried from the royal capital with Lex because we received word zombies had shown up on the outskirts of the city.

“BWOOAAAHH!”

Five zombies amble toward me. When I first arrived in this world, I screamed when I was up against just one, but obviously, I'm used to them now. Plus, I don't have much to fear during the day with Lex at my side, either.

“I'll knock them down one at a time! Keep the other zombies in check while I do!” Lex commands the soldiers as he charges into a zombie with his shield out. Once it's down, he shouts to me over his shoulder. “Lady Mizuha!”

“On it!”

I smack the zombie held down by Lex's shield, and it begins to brightly glow—a sign the purification process has begun. We move on to purify the next zombie without waiting for the first to finish becoming human. Then the next and the next and the next are purified the same way. We finished purifying five zombies in no time.

“I apologize for calling you out here during your day off, Holy Priestess...”

“Please think nothing of it. This isn't enough to tire me out,” I say with a smile to the overly apologetic soldier. I said that in part because I don't want the soldiers to feel any guilt for asking me to help, and also because it's true.

I watch the soldiers caring for the newly dezombified people as I speak with Lex. “Maybe it's just me, but it seems like we are seeing a lot more stragglers again.”

“There are indeed more than before. Mayhap they are traveling here from other territories.” Lex gazes into the distance.

“You know, I get the feeling this will never end if we don't do

anything about Cladorca.”

“You make a good point, m’lady. You could say that extends to everywhere else we leave untouched and not just Cladorca.”

Goddess Sadia said something like the world will purify at a gradual pace, but I think that “gradual” will take longer than one generation. I’m pretty sure that’s why she was okay with me staying behind to continue my work as Priestess.

And if that’s true, then my opinion concerning the other kingdoms isn’t wrong.



“**WOW!** You ran into somethin’ like that?”

“It was HORRIBLE! Get this: it’s huge, it flies, and it spews black flames! But worse than any of that is the *STENCH!* It reeks ten times worse than the Boneless Hams!” I rant.

It’s the next day, and I’ve run into a familiar face while walking the capital’s main street with Lex. That familiar face is Rosso, a petty thief who has turned his life around and become attached to me ever since I caught him in the act.

Now he makes a living peddling the bread his younger sister bakes. There’s not a single roll left in the wagon he’s leaning against. This sibling-duo currently runs the most popular bakery in the royal capital, possibly thanks to being the first people to start selling after the initial purification period.

“For all that complainin’ and danger you faced, you’re still gonna go purify it. You never cease to amaze me, Boss Lady!”

“You think I’m being crazy too, Rosso?”

“Well, yeah. But it’s something you’d do!”

“Really? I don’t recall being the type to run toward danger.” Apparently that was a shocking revelation because both Rosso and Lex share a skeptical look.

“Sure you might complain while you do it, but you’ve always jumped headlong into danger. Don’t you agree, Boss Man?”

“I do. Not only have you gone on countless purification expeditions, but you also subjugated the Dark Djinn. Not to mention, you stayed behind to save this world.”

I can’t argue when he gives that many examples. But, put another way, these are all things I chose to do of my own volition.

That's not a bad thing—or I'd like to *think* it's not.

Rosso leaves his wagon to stand in front of me. He pounds his right fist against his chest as if to symbolize I can count on him. "Please be sure to call on me before you leave. I'm helpin' my sister bake bread now, but I haven't quit being your underling."

"Thanks, Rosso. But you can stop calling yourself my underling."

"I'll never give it up!"

I wish he understood how awkward it feels to be called Boss Lady by an older man. The most disturbing thing is I've stopped finding it as awkward as I did in the beginning. Scary!

"I would be honored for Sir Rosso to join us."

"Boss Man! Then again, I'm not sure there's much I can do for you."

"But there is. Your agility is invaluable to any mission."

"In that case, I'll make the best of these legs and dance 'round any obstacle for ya." Rosso does a little jig after hearing Lex's emphatic praise for his skill.

I can never keep up with these two, but that doesn't change how reliable they are. If everything goes according to plan and we receive the okay to enact Operation Purify Cladorca, I'll take Rosso up on his offer.

"I'd better get movin' soon," Rosso says, lifting the wagon handle.

"Oh, sorry for keeping you."

"No worries, Boss Lady. I'm glad I got to hear what you guys have been up to lately. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that my kid sister has been on my case about gettin' you to try her best tasting bread yet. Please drop by for a bite next time you have the chance."

"Really?! Tell her I'm looking forward to trying it!"

"I will!" he responds cheerily and pulls his wagon down the street.

"You look happy, Lady Mizuha."

"Normally, I'd deny it, but I'll just have to admit it this time."

Rosso said he will join a dangerous operation for the likes of a normal little girl like me. That fills me with more joy than it does guilt.

We resume our casual patrol of the capital until our course takes us near where I hear familiar crisp thuds—they're coming from the training grounds. I steal a peek from the outside and catch

sight of short people loosing arrows.

"The Lucors came to train again today?"

"The appearance of zombie birds followed by dragons has made anti-air warfare even more vital to our survival, so there will be a greater emphasis put on archery skills from now on," Lex explains.

More than half of the arrows the Lucors shot hit the dragon. Sadly, none stuck, but since that will be resolved with Pino's plan, archery is critical for success in our upcoming battle. It would be great if their skills can be passed on to more people.

"It's better not to ask for their help with Operation Purify yet, right?"

"I think not, m'lady. You should only bring it up once it is officially decided so as not to invite unnecessary confusion."

"That's what I'll do then. Hey, is it okay if I check in on them for a bit?"

"Of course."

Just like that, my patrol took me inside the training grounds. The closer I get to the action, the more intense the sounds become. This time though, I'm not here to observe or try it.

"Hello. Have you seen Nady by any chance?" I ask a young male Lucor sitting on the sidelines taking a break.

"...She's not here."

"I see. Do you happen to know where she is?"

"I don't know anything about the *coward* who couldn't shoot to save the Holy Priestess." He's stating the facts but in an awfully barbed tone. It rubs me the wrong way.

"This has been bothering me for a while, but why do you all speak so poorly of Nady? Aren't you from the same tribe?"

"That *giant* ain't a Lucor!" Another young male Lucor came over to us just to say that. I can only hear that as purposeful badmouthing. Plus, he's making Nady sound like a pariah. I can't let his comment pass.

"There is no one in the world who has the exact same face or body type—it's wrong to belittle someone solely because they're of a different height," I chide.

"I am grateful to you, Holy Priestess. But you have no right to butt into matters involving our people."

I certainly am a third party to their problems, but Nady is my friend. I can't let such bigotry slide, nor do I want to. Lex tries to

mediate between us, but I'm too ticked off to back down.

"What are you lot doing?"

"Ch-Chieftain...!"

Were we making too much of a scene? Theos has come running over from the archery range. The young people, who gathered around to make comments or watch, all scatter before his stern face. They look just as unsatisfied by our conversation as I feel, but not even they want this argument to blow up more than it already has. The main two troublemakers bow once and take their leave.

"Are you all right, Lady Mizuha?"

"Yeah. Sorry for making a scene, Lex."

I've never been able to sit by and idly watch someone trash a friend. I keep telling myself I need to stop getting so worked up all the time, but I never do anything to change it. I exhale my pent up anger.

"I deeply apologize for them offending you, Holy Priestess," Theos says, bowing his head to me.

"I'm the one who is sorry for getting heated. Is it all right if I ask you a question?" Theos nods. "You have noticed everyone says bad things about Nady, I'm sure?"

"...Of course I have. The fault lies with me: from her inability to blend in with the others to her timid personality." As he speaks, sadness fills his face. He trembles as he painfully squeezes his hands together. There's more to this than meets the eye.

"Do you know where Nady is?" I ask to change the topic. "I want to have a proper talk with her..."

I don't know anything about Nady. I never know what has her worried despite being friends. So I want to learn more—for both of our sakes.

After some thought, Theos nods, perhaps because he sensed my determination.

"I have an idea where she might be. However...will you hear me out first before I tell you?"

◆ Chapter 15: Nady's Feelings

I'M currently visiting a section of the capital that's considered the outskirts of the city. I tell Lex to wait for me just outside a poorly lit alleyway. I discover a Lucor girl—Nady—sitting on a wood box right around the first corner.

What is she doing in such a place? The answer's self-explanatory: her gentle gaze is trained on a lone holy flower.

"I didn't know one was growing here, too."

Nady jumps when she hears my voice. She nervously looks at me and blinks. "Mizuha? Why are you—"

"Theos told me you were here. He said, 'That girl loves flowers, so you can probably find her where she recently discovered another holy flower.'"

This spot is close to where Grantz Kingdom has provided temporary housing for the Lucors until it's safe for them to go home. However, the alleyways form a complex maze that's out of sight from the main roads. I don't think Theos accidentally stumbled across Nady's hiding place here but secretly trailed her out of concern for her whereabouts.

"Did my father tell you something...unnecessary?" Nady asks, uncomfortably averting her eyes.

"...Yeah, he told me a bit about your mom."

Nady's mom died during childbirth. So, Theos ended up raising Nady as a single dad.

"I see..."

"I'm sorry I heard about your past from someone else."

"It's okay. Father told you because he wanted to. I planned on telling you someday soon anyway," she says, squeezing together the hands she had resting on her knees.

She looks like she's struggling to say more. I quietly wait for her to open up, and she eventually starts to talk about it, albeit slowly.

"I'm grateful to my father, really. He raised me despite ending up alone after Mother passed away—all while fulfilling his duties as

the Lucor Chieftain. But you know what? That made it that much harder on me. It was *miserable* being raised as the Chieftain's daughter...!"

These must be the feelings she has kept pent up for years. Once she starts talking about it, she *can't* stop.

Lips trembling, she vents even more. "I tried my *hardest*, too! I thought I had to become strong because I'm the Chieftain's *daughter*. But no matter how hard I tried, I could never shoot a living creature...!"

Anyone can see that Nady excels at archery, even over the other Lucors. I've been curious why everyone says she has never successfully hunted before—being incapable of shooting animals is a valid explanation.

From the standards of my world, I think it's perfectly fine that she doesn't want to hurt animals. However, the Lucors are a *hunting* tribe. Her resistance to hunting is considered so crippling by her people, outsiders can't even begin to understand it. It's easy to see how important it is by watching the contempt the other Lucors show Nady.

"At some point along the way, I just...gave up. I had enough. I'm sure Father talked to you because he's disappointed in me..."

"I don't think that's true. Theos seems to be plagued by regret. He told me, 'I've forced that child into a corner.'"

The anguish on his face proves he's not disappointed in her.

"I have no idea how much suffering you have lived through, Nady. But I can tell you have worked *really* hard. Giving up isn't necessarily a bad thing. And if you are hesitant to give up, then take some time to yourself to figure out what you *really* want to do."

"...You know, I think I have always been waiting for someone to tell me what you just did, Mizuha. But...but..." Nady squeezes her fisted hands even tighter. As her trembling spreads throughout her body, she cries out the feelings buried deep inside. "I was so *frustrated*! I was upset with myself for being unable to shoot at the dragon! I can't believe I couldn't even shoot to save the first *friend* I've ever made!"

Just when I thought that we had made up after our last fight, she had pulled away from me again. I couldn't understand why at the time, but now I think I finally get what's eating away at her.

"...I'm sorry for making you see me like this."

"Don't be. I'm happy you're letting me in."

“Mizuha...”

We can finally make up for real and hang out again. With that in mind, I step forward to close the distance between us, when Nady suddenly looks away as if she’s rejecting me.

“Please...give me some more time alone. I’m sorry...”

The rejection was too much for me to come up with anything more to say to her.

◆ Chapter 16: Little Sister and Princess

“...SIS...TER. Big...ter...”

Someone is talking to me. My brain comprehends that much, but it sounds like it’s coming from a mile away. The last “Big Sister” finally snaps me out of it.

“Hm? What was that? Sorry...I zoned out for a minute.”

I’m combing out Cia’s hair in front of a mirror. We just got out of the bath and are getting ready for bed. The mirror reflects our matching thin nightgowns—pink for me, aqua for Cia.

“Uh...what were we talking about again?” I ask.

“I was asking about your plans for tomorrow...?”

“Oh, right! I remember now. Let’s see, in the morning I have to attend a meeting about where the next expedition should go and talk with several of the nobles. Then in the afternoon...”

“Are you all right? You seem lost in thought a lot lately.” Cia directs her worried look at me through the mirror. “Is the matter with Cladorca still bothering you?”

“...You can tell?”

“Yes. Your gloominess started then.”

“I guess so. But...that’s not the only thing on my mind—nothing has been going well for me lately. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say I can’t pull anything off the right way. I thought I’ve matured, but I keep getting reminded that I’m still just a kid.”

There’s no denying that I’ve become capable of doing more than when I was a little kid. But I don’t know how to use these powers I’ve obtained. What’s the right way to use them? What are they capable of? So much of it is still a mystery to me.

“You aren’t just some kid!” Cia suddenly speaks up in a strong voice, overpowering my tireless sighing. “You are doing a *marvelous* job fulfilling your duties as the Holy Priestess. And not just as the Priestess, but as a woman.”

“Cia...”

“I want to grow up to be just like you, Big Sister.”

Cia is significantly younger than me, so it’s a given that I look

like a grown-up to her. Setting our age difference aside, she views me as a role model, which sounds more appealing than just being older.

“I love you, Cia!” I exclaim.

“B-Big Sister!”

I’m already hugging her from behind before I can think twice. Her startled face reflects back at me in the mirror.

“You are my one true happy place, Cia!”

“I-I don’t really understand what that means, but...I’m glad to be of service to you.” Cia gently rests her hands on my arms. Right now my chin is snuggled into her shoulder. My smile grows even bigger when I see our beaming faces in the mirror together.

“Oh, but a word of warning, I’m happy you want to be like me when you get older, but I don’t recommend it.”

“Wh-Why not?”

“Because I’m not very ladylike. I don’t mean to, but I do run around screaming a lot. Grantz will be disappointed if you become like me. You might be dubbed the Tomboy Princess.”

“No! There is no question the Big Sister I see is a *wonderful* woman! If becoming like you means I will be called the Tomboy Princess, then I will take pride in that title. They can bring it!” Cia declares without any hesitation whatsoever.

Cia is the last person I expect to turn out like me with how graceful and ladylike she is, but I hate to see what happens if she does grow up that way.

I try to follow basic etiquette, but that’s the etiquette among common people—I definitely haven’t fully assimilated into my current environment. I can’t stop worrying my commoner traits will rub off on Cia. Aah, my king, I apologize if your daughter develops strange habits. Then again, she might have already started to develop them since she wants to be like me.

I let go of Cia and take a deep breath to chase away the fog that’s been hanging over me. Surprisingly, it helps.

“I can do this!”

“D-Do what?”

“You helped me get over a lot of things that were on my mind. Thanks!”

My sudden change seems to have alarmed her. But after seeing how refreshed I look, she happily responds, “That’s good then!”

“I guess I’d better start with the king. I’m no good at

persuasion, so my best bet is to take him down with my feelings. Time to go for broke!”

“...Try not to break anything.”

“I won’t! At any rate, I’m going to move things forward.”

“Then I will do what I can on my side to help,” Cia says, standing to face me. I’m thrilled she’s going to help, but I’m afraid she wants to join us during the dangerous parts too. She must’ve seen the worry on my face because she forces a smile. “Please don’t worry. I understand I will only be a burden if I go with you, so I won’t ask the impossible, even though I really want to...” She purses her lips.

I fear my tomboyish nature has already rubbed off on her. I’m sorry, Your Majesty. It might already be too late for you to make a difference.

“I am going to help you by leveraging my authority as Princess,” she says, her expression becoming regal. It appears the girl before me is not just my little sister, but the princess. “I shall ask my father to set up a forum to discuss the purification of Cladorca.”

◆ Chapter 17: Acting like the Priestess I am

“ARE you nervous, Lady Mizuha?”

“Y-Yeah, hard not to be...”

I’m currently waiting outside the audience chamber with Lex.

“Cia said she was going to create an opportunity for me to speak with the king, but I didn’t expect it to happen *the next day*. Not to mention for it to be an official audience...”

“Would you rather turn back?”

“...No. I don’t want that. I’ve already made up my mind.”

I’m aware that being indecisive and a coward are my two worst traits. So I want to become the kind of adult who takes action on the things I have decided.

“You may enter, Priestess Mizuha.”

“Th-Thank you!” My voice cracks in response to the doorkeeper.

This isn’t good—I’m more nervous than I thought. Careful breathing isn’t helping me take that first step forward. The doorkeepers are eyeing me funny because I’m not moving, which only inflames my panic.

Before I know it, I have tunnel vision. But it goes away in an instant because of the large hand resting on my right shoulder.

I look over at Lex’s smiling face. “You are welcome to express your thoughts with His Majesty without conforming to court formality,” he tells me.

“B-But I can’t stop thinking I might say something offensive...”

“I will be standing right beside you. Whatever may happen, I, Lex Irvine, shall protect you till the end, Lady Mizuha.”

Lex is the kind of man who always tells me exactly what I need to hear when it counts—even though he’s a weirdo. It’s not fair. Curiously enough, it lightens the load crushing down on me mentally and physically.

“Thanks, Lex. I’m okay now.”

Lex nods with a serene smile as if he sensed I had gotten over my fears.

The doorkeepers open the double doors in time with my first step. I sharply suck in my breath. I've visited the royal audience chamber many times before, but my impression of it changes with each passing day since the king has regained his throne. The chamber has grown more extravagant. The drastic change is even more overwhelming this time because it has been a while since I last came here.

I nervously step inside the audience chamber. The king is obviously sitting on his throne. Beside him is Queen Lia. She's as beautiful as you would expect of Cia's mother. Cia and Sir Oden are also present, as well as a good number of castle guards and royal knights.

The atmosphere is more imposing than it has ever been. I move only my eyes to survey the surroundings while I approach the throne. It goes without saying that I don't know the proper etiquette in this situation. I just mimic Lex at my side and go down on one knee with my head bowed.

"Please be at ease, Priestess who hath devoted yourself to saving us."

Normally I would correct him by saying I'm not as big of a deal as he makes me out to be, but right now I feel like that title is the only leg I have to stand on. I rise per his command and lift my head.

"Thank you for making time for me today, Your Majesty."

"Cia informed me you wish to continue our discussion from the other day. Is this true?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," I reply. Here comes the decisive moment. I quietly take a deep breath and begin making my case. "I would like to purify the Trade City of Cladorca. However, I cannot take on such a feat *alone*. Is Grantz Kingdom willing to lend me their aid?"

"My decision regarding this matter has not changed since we last spoke. Purifying Cladorca will lead to external pressure to purify all of Torstana. Once we do that, our kingdom will be placed in danger."

The king's opinion hasn't changed, which I expected. If anything, his word choice is even harsher than last time.

"I hear that Cladorca is not only overrun by thousands of zombies but is also patrolled by a flying dragon. Even if, on the off-chance, I lent you my armies, is purification actually *possible*?"

"I have already consulted Pino—Master Pino—and worked out

a solution for the dragon and the zombies rampant around Cladorca,” I explain.

“Let’s say this solution of yours works for argument’s sake. How do you intend to handle Torstana once it’s purified? Torstana’s king is likely to invade our kingdom once he realizes there isn’t a greater threat to stop him,” His Majesty argues. “It’s highly conceivable he will massacre the Ladans while they are still zombies!”

The king is normally a compassionate and lenient man. However, he is addressing me with the full might and authority of his station. I recoil from the censure in his voice.

“...I will persuade them not to. I may not be of much assistance, but I will help in *any way* I can.”

“I’m sorry to say they are not the *type* of people to obey just because you are the Priestess who saved them,” he swiftly rejects my flimsy reasoning.

I hadn’t realized we had entered into a battle of words. I didn’t come here to debate the king. I clench my fists behind my back and look him in the eyes.

“Goddess Sadia said this world was originally overrun by zombies because the two world powers were at war. In other words, the apocalypse was brought on by the ugliness of the human heart. If that is the way things work in this world, then I *strongly* believe that leaving the other major kingdoms to their doom and choosing peace for ourselves will lead us to repeat the same fate.”

The king must have come to the same conclusion as evidenced by the slight grimace creeping onto his face.

“Furthermore, I don’t believe it is our right to decide who does and doesn’t deserve to be purified. Does that not make us the same as the Dark Djinn?”

Nervous tension courses through the audience chamber. The castle guards squeeze their sword hilts. I don’t blame them because I essentially just lumped their king in with the Dark Djinn.

Maybe I pushed too hard. But I won’t be able to reach the king if I mince words. I manage to stop myself from cringing and continue my case. “I also wish for things to remain peaceful forever, but it is up to humanity to walk that path. In the end, even if someone creates a path for you, if you don’t know how to *walk*, you can easily go off track.”

They might all be thinking I have some nerve to be challenging

the king like this. But this is the decision I have come to. I am going to boldly voice it to the very end.

"I have touched on the various reasons why we should help them, but in the end...the biggest reason is that I personally can't stand to leave things the way they are."

Did my last comment come off as too childish? Everyone looks dumbfounded. I had debated wording it that way, but I'm also a human being. I need them to know that before I'm their Priestess, I have my own thoughts, feelings, and biases as a person.

"Your Majesty, please allow me to speak," Sir Oden requests while everyone else is still in shock. Once the king gives him pardon, he speaks his piece. "If we decline the Holy Priestess's request, we will sustain a *dire* loss."

"Tell me: what is that loss?"

"Our kingdom's strongest knight, Lex Irvine."

"C-Captain! I asked you to keep that matter between *us*!" Lex cries out in a panic.

I shift my gaze to him to wordlessly ask what this is about, only for him to turn his face away. Seeking an answer, I redirect my question toward Sir Oden.

"Why would that happen?"

"Last night Lex came to me and said, 'I will act on Lady Mizuha's behalf even if Grantz is uncooperative,'" Sir Oden imparts, a slightly mischievous smile encroaching on his face.

Lex said something similar to me before too. Though I didn't expect him to inform Sir Oden as well. A mix of joy and shock cause my mouth to fall open.

Meanwhile, a hearty "Ha! Ha! Ha!" comes from the king's throne. "Why has the Goddess put me in such a predicament? Not only has my beloved daughter turned against me, but even my kingdom's strongest knight has his sword at my throat!"

"Y-Your Majesty! I would never draw my sword on you!" Lex splutters.

"It's just an analogy." Quite the *violent* analogy. Still, the king seems to be in awfully good spirits. Things might work out—or so I thought, but I jumped the gun. In a single instant, the sternness returns to His Majesty's face.

"Unfortunately, this matter is far too important for me to be swayed by a purely emotional appeal."

"F-Father—"

“Hold your tongue, Cia.”

Cia tried to help, but she was immediately dismissed. His Majesty always dotes on Cia, but he places a greater emphasis on maintaining his authority during public affairs. Now that it's come down to this, I have no choice but to carve open a path with my own words.

“If everything goes well in Cladorca, we will surely face similar issues elsewhere in the future. Thus, I plan to do what is right as ‘the Priestess who Aligns with Grantz Kingdom.’”

I currently have my title as Goddess Sadia's Priestess. I'm the only human capable of purifying zombies. I'm confident that will make others view me as the most important existence in this apocalyptic world. By aligning myself with one kingdom, I'm giving them a huge advantage over the others.

“...Good heavens, my kingdom has the terrible problem of having too many talented people.” His Majesty suddenly laughs.

It sounds like he realized Pino gave me a hint on how to convince him. But the king seems so delighted by it, the smile reaches his eyes.

“You have persuaded me. I hereby vow Grantz Kingdom shall assist Holy Priestess Mizuha with Operation Purify Cladorca.”

At long last, he gave the permission I was waiting for. I'm skeptical I misheard him, but the smile on Cia's face tells another story. I've felt such tremendous pressure to do right by this issue, that now I can finally breathe easy.

“However, you *only* have my permission once you are fully prepared.”

“Yes, Your Majesty! I promise to make sure we have a plan in place that guarantees everyone's safe return!”

Our opponent is a dangerous dragon that makes the Boneless Hams look like kittens in comparison. Maybe I shouldn't be throwing around promises and guarantees when facing such a threat, but it's a promise I want to make.

“Things turned out just the way you wanted, Lady Mizuha.” Lex rejoices over my victory as if it is his own. He not only worked behind the scenes to help me, but I'm even more grateful he continued to stand by me when push came to shove.

“Yeah! All thanks to you, Lex. Thank you!”

It was touch and go there for a moment, but it all worked out in the end. Now comes the real challenge. I have to work harder

than anyone to repay the people who bent for my ambitions.

Time to get serious!

◆ Chapter 18: Departing Grantz Royal Capital

“SO many troops... There’s more than who joined us on the quest to vanquish the Dark Djinn, right?”

“Altogether, one hundred and fifty soldiers are joining us to vanquish the dragon!”

Shortly after the sun rose, Lex and I stepped outside the walls protecting the royal capital. Twenty days have passed since His Majesty the King vowed to back Operation Purify Cladorca.

Finally, the day of the operation has arrived.

Grantz soldiers assigned to this quest are waiting as far as the eye can see. It’s a spectacular sight to behold, especially when it’s rare to have this many people gathered in one location. What’s worrisome is the number of horses they are using to travel to Cladorca. Horses will also be used to pull carriages, but for the most part, it’s one soldier to a horse.

“Is it really okay to spare so many horses for our cause?” I ask.

“We have to, with this many of our troops going out. We can’t risk camping anywhere within the zombie-infested Torstana,” Lex explains. “Our strategy banks on speed, hence the horses.”

With time, the horses will reproduce and increase in numbers, but the world isn’t safe enough for that yet. Every horse here was freed from the various Boneless Hams I’ve defeated. They are still a commodity that is hard to come by.

“To think you would actually bring my plans to fruition...” Pino says as he walks up to us.

“You say that like you didn’t *believe* I could do it, but you prepared everything in advance,” I retort with a smirk.

“I only handed out instructions, nothing more. It is the people who actually took action that deserve the praise.” Pino always has a sour look on his face, but he actually does a lot for the people around him. He’s capable of so much, I often doubt he’s younger than me.

“Of course everyone deserves praise for getting us this far, but

that doesn't take away from your awesome contribution, Pino! For example, I would've never come up with anti-dragon arrows like you did!"

"Nor would I," Lex agrees, sounding impressed.

"Not just *anyone* could come up with attaching thin glass filled with holy water to the arrowheads."

"It wasn't feasible to create an item each person would have to splash on the dragon before they strike. I merely thought up a means to use the dragon's thick hide against it. Like I said, I didn't do much," Pino insists, being modest once again.

Some people say being too humble can be a sign of arrogance, but I don't hear a lick of backhanded boasting from him. Maybe I'm just too much of an optimistic thinker, but I only feel impressed by Pino.

"At least now the dragon isn't *as* scary," I say.

"We don't have much information on it yet. Don't underestimate it," Pino warns.

"I know, I know. I won't!" My carefree response earns an askance look from him. Obviously, I don't expect everything to go according to plan. Whenever a problem arises, I'll have to find a solution. Still, I rather go in thinking it will work than otherwise.

"MiZUha!"

"Geh! It appears." I hate myself for knowing him by his voice.

Realizing an annoying person had come, Pino turns on his heel to leave. "Good luck."

"Aw, you're leaving?!"

"I don't specialize in pesky nobles. Goodbye." Pino heartlessly walks away. I regret not bringing up Cia to keep him here. I consider chasing after him, but it's too late—the pesky noble, Keith Rowadan, is standing before me, smiling from ear to ear.

"...I heard you were coming, but hoped otherwise," I sigh.

"It's only natural for me to join the operation when my future *wife* is involved. I can't allow my bride to venture into danger alone!"

"*Please* don't decide my future for me."

"HA! HA! Your shyness is as precious as always, my MiZUha!"

It's impossible to hold a real conversation with him. I wish he would use his unshakeable will toward something that would better the world.

"Now, get on my horse with me—"

“Lord Rowadan,” Lex interrupts. “You seem to have misunderstood your orders. You have been assigned to the main force. Lady Mizuha is a part of the detached force.”

“H-How can that be?! I agreed to partake because I would be with MiZUha! There’s no point if she’s elsewhere!”

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but the assignments have already been decided,” Lex informs.

“Then reassign me to the detached force!” Keith demands.

“It cannot be done. The detached unit consists only of *elites*. With all due respect, you will hinder our efforts,” Lex declines in a clear cut manner that belies his usual benevolence.

That being said, we are literally heading toward the jaws of danger—considering one wrong step might get someone or everyone killed, I agree with Lex’s approach of bluntly rejecting him.

Keith has tasted defeat at Lex’s hands too many times to count, so he’s fully aware he can’t override his decision. His whole body trembles with rage.

“My love for MiZUha is second to none!” he rages.

“In that case, you should refrain from joining our unit, as you are likely to summon zombies to our location through your tireless shouts of love. Please show Lord Rowadan to his assigned location.” Lex signals several soldiers who firmly restrain Keith’s arms. They drag him away per usual, just this time his horse follows.

“Un-Unhand me! Blast! *MiZUha!* No matter how far apart we are, the love that ties us together shall never come undone! Call my name when you get lonely! I swear I will make my way to you!”

“Yeah, whatever you say. Please try not to cause problems for the others,” I say dryly.

“I just heard it! Your loving voice has reached me, MiZUha! As I thought, you and I are connected by love—” His rant sounds like it’s going to go on for a long time, so I consciously push it out of my mind. He never ceases to be a tiring man.

“...I have never seen a more frustrating man in my life. I and the other believers shall protect our Goddess.”

Oh joy, another nuisance has arrived in Keith’s place.

“I figured they would come too...” I say to Lex.

“What a coincidence, Lady Mizuha, I did too.”

Lex and I turn toward the speaker together. Lo and behold, we find a group of people clad in hooded cloaks headed up by Iris.

These are the fanatic believers belonging to the Church of Our Lady Mizuha that mistakenly worships me as the goddess. There are a total of fifty members. My greatest concern of late is the steady increase in members every time I see them.

Exhaling an exhausted sigh, I ask, “You’re going to come even if I tell you not to, aren’t you?”

“We are always one with our Goddess,” Iris proclaims.

“...Telling you *no* isn’t going to work, is it?”

“Heavens no!”

Yeah, I figured as much. I did, but I wish they hid it better.

“But we will be traveling by horse. How will you keep up?”

“We will run alongside you.”

I struggle to call them devout believers when I’m what they worship, but in any case, they run on a useless amount of moxie. I bet they will push through any obstacle with willpower alone.

“I know you were listening to us tell Keith this, but I am a part of a detached force. If you want to assist, please lend your efforts to the main force. Will you do that for me?” I phrase it like a request.

“...Y-You can count on us...!” Iris exclaims.

“You paused for a long time there.”

“You imagined it.”

She absolutely plans to tag along with my unit.

“If you’re lying, I’ll have Lex destroy each and every item everyone is carrying right now,” I threaten.

“Y-You mustn’t! Not our precious goddess statues!”

“Everyone, get in formation—the anti-Goddess formation!”

The believers form a circle with their backs facing inward. It’s definitely a formation to protect “my statue” from *me*. I’m not even sure where to begin picking apart the irony of the situation, but if nothing else, they seem intent on carrying a statue of me with them everywhere.

Though I seriously hate that statue and how high-quality it is, they view it as more precious than their lives, so I have yet to get them to let it go. Threatening to destroy it was super effective though.

“You will obey my orders, right?” I ask and get an immediate affirmative.

I thought that settled it until Lex whispers in my ear. “Lady Mizuha, I suggest permitting *just* Miss Iris to join our unit.”

“Are you serious? It’s a given she’ll try something funny.”

“But her superhuman strength is invaluable. I assure you it will come in handy.”

Iris has absurd physical strength—she might even best Lex. Maybe we will come across a situation that could use her.

“My goddess is staring at me...”

I’m extremely concerned this isn’t going to work out when just *glancing* her way overexcites her, but beggars can’t be choosers.

“Uh...will you join me on the detached unit, Iris?”

“May I?”

“Yeah. Only if you want to, since it’ll be dangerous.”

“I want to! I’m absolutely coming if you allow it!” Iris snorts, her eyes gleaming dangerously.

I didn’t think she would decline, but...I’m seriously doubting my decision to invite her after seeing her extreme reaction.

“Oh my Goddess! Why is only Sister Iris allowed?!”

“If she’s going, then so am I!”

“No, I’ll go! I’ll watch the Goddess’s back!”

The other fanatics are protesting my decision, which I expected to happen. Iris arrogantly puffs out her chest in front of them.

“You mustn’t cause problems for our goddess. Accept her divine decision making—her decision to choose Iris.”

She’s only provoking them, as evidenced by the other fanatics’ vengeful growling and groaning. If I let them go like this, they’ll only become deadweight for the main force. I’m going to have to step out of character for a moment.

“Everyone, please hear me out!” I say in my best endearing voice. “I am in charge of this operation, so I will be super-duper sad if it fails. Won’t you pretty please help me out? If you all cooperate, it will make me, well, the happiest girl in the world.”

“Anything for you, Goddess!”

They instantly agreed. For a moment, I wonder if that was a little too easy, but I’ve decided to shelve that thought after seeing the *dopey* smiles on their faces.

“I’ll be damned, Boss Lady is a sinful woman,” someone teases. I follow the laughter to Rosso.

“Don’t give me a bad name. G-Granted, I also think I might’ve gone a little too far just now...”

“Being self-aware means you’ve got what it takes to become a *femme fatale*.”

He can call me that all he likes—I know I’m far from becoming a femme fatale. After all, how can I ensnare men when I haven’t even *dated* before? He’s only distorting the definition of the word by using it on me.

“Anyway, I’m late to the party, but I, Rosso, am here to join your unit, Boss Lady, Boss Man!”

“Let us protect Lady Mizuha together, Sir Rosso,” Lex says, shaking his hand.

“Thanks for coming, Rosso. I’m glad to have you.”

“I did promise to help out. Hehe...” Rosso sheepishly scratches the tip of his nose.

Our first encounter was as bad as they come, but now, Rosso is a friend I can trust. It’s really reassuring to have him on the team.

“I guess that’s everyone for our unit,” I say, looking over our members.

The detached force consists of me, Lex, Rosso, and ten soldiers. Add in the last-minute addition of Iris, and that makes fourteen in total. Though our numbers are paltry compared to the main force, our unit is made up of the best of the best. Iris is a potential loose cannon, but I’m positive it will turn out okay—I hope.

The Lucors exit the city gate next. Their unit is made up of thirty men, including Theos, the commanding officer. Each of them is leading a small, pony-like horse. Nothing is overpowering or impressive about them at a glance, but I know how skilled they are with the bow.

I approach them and sweep into a deep bow. “Thank you very much for participating in this operation, Theos.”

“Please raise your head, Holy Priestess. We Lucor owe you a debt. We will follow wherever you go with the battle flag raised.”

The other Lucors nod and sound off in agreement with Theos. Honestly, traveling all over a medieval world purifying zombies is no easy job. I don’t expect anyone to return the favor, but it does make me happy to see my efforts pay off in this way.

That said, there’s a part of me that isn’t happy. Nady, who I thought just might be with the Lucor unit, isn’t there. I haven’t held a decent conversation with her since she asked me to give her space. I had hoped to speak with her before this operation started, but it looks like I won’t get the chance to.

“Mizuha!”

The voice I wanted to hear most right now shatters my doubts.

I look toward the gate—a tall Lucor girl is running toward me, leading a horse behind her. There's no mistake—that's Nady.

"...Nady? How come you're here? ...And why are you dressed like that?"

"Please add me to your detached force, Mizuha."

She has a bow and quiver like the other Lucors. It seems she really intends to fight. Truthfully, I would love to take this journey together. But I also have reservations about bringing her when she doesn't like to fight.

Theos steps in when I'm fumbling for an answer. "Having an archer incapable of using their bow will only hinder their unit."

"You don't have to word it that way," I say.

"Forgive me, Holy Priestess, but this is a matter between Lucors."

Theos's face is so callous, I flinch. He's the only person I've met who's as intimidating as Sir Oden—his height does nothing to lessen the effect. Anyone would cringe before his stony face. Nady, however, faces off with him without recoiling.

"As you said, Father—Chieftain, I still have much growing to do. However, I still wish to partake in this battle to protect my dear friend."

"Wanting to fight is different from being capable of doing it. Let me ask you once more: are you capable of fighting? Can you shoot an arrow into that dragon?"

"...Yes, Chieftain. This time I will, without fail."

His question was not directed at his daughter but to a warrior. And Nady answered not to her father, but her Chieftain.

"Then I free you to choose your own path. However, you will be accountable to the punishment for tarnishing the Lucor name."

"Yes, I will relinquish the Lucor name should I fail." A commotion erupts among the other Lucors. They never expected Nady to agree to that. Nor did I, honestly.

Theos coolly nods and takes the Lucor unit to join the main force. Left behind, Nady directs an awkward smile at me.

"I'm sorry this is all so abrupt, Mizuha."

"N-Nah, it's all good. But are you sure this is what you want? Relinquishing the Lucor name..."

"That is the only way I can prove my resolve."

I'm flattered she's willing to risk it all for me, but it's worrying. Though I'm not going to talk her out of something she has already

set her mind to. The only thing I should be doing right now is trust in my friend and the decision she made.

“You don’t mind, right, Lex?”

“I was deeply impressed by her skill with the bow, m’lady. She will surely aid our cause.” In other words, he’s okay with it.

“Welcome to the team, Nady.”

“Thanks. I’ll do my best.”

We take hold of each other’s hand and shake on it. Nady’s hands are big. It’s been so long since we last touched, she feels warmer than usual.

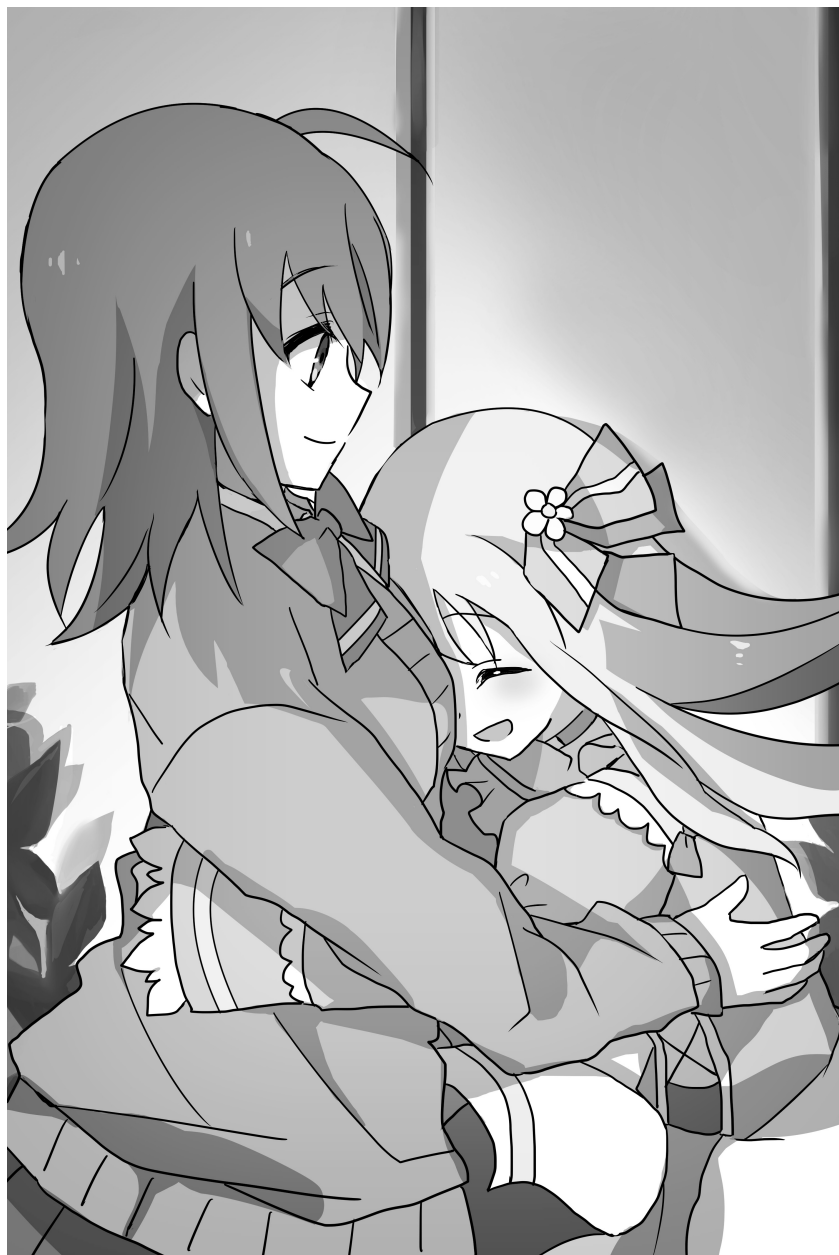
“We should depart soon, Lady Mizuha.”

“Okay!”

Urged to leave by Lex, I turn my back on Grantz’s royal capital.

“Big Sister!” Only one person calls me that.

I turn and see Cia running up to me. She outruns her knights and lunges into my arms.



“Thank you for coming to see me off.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world. But I am terribly worried... I heard this quest is more dangerous than any before it.”

“It will all work out,” I reassure her. “People we can depend on have my back.”

The members of the detached unit nod and pound their chests in agreement with my words. Cia should have seen their valiant gesture, but her expression remains dark.

“I wish there was something I could do to help,” she says sadly.

“You already did by coming to see me off. But if I can ask one favor of you, I want to hear you say ‘See you again soon.’”

“I can do that, but...is that really all you want?”

“Yes. It’s what people say when they see each other off in my world. It’s most commonly used among family members.”

“Among family? ...I will try my hardest then.” Cia seems to be psyching herself out as if she’s taking on a once in a lifetime challenge. I think that goes to show just how special the word *family* is to her, but I’m not looking for a tense goodbye.

“Cia, you don’t have to try hard to say it. It’s nothing formal. Just be casual about it.”

“R-Really? I-In that case...” Cia exhales, releasing the tension from her fists and shoulders, and looks up at me with a serene smile. “See you again soon, Big Sister!”

I’m headed straight toward danger. But Cia’s farewell eases the pressure off me.

I create a smile as brilliant as hers and exclaim, “Thanks! I’ll be back soon!”

◆ Chapter 19: Well, I Didn't Expect That

"I still can't get used to horseback riding even after all the expeditions... My butt hurts..." I groan.

"We haven't stopped much since departing the capital after all. Please rest while Sir Rosso is scouting ahead."

Four hours have passed since we left the royal capital. We've progressed without encountering much threat from the zombies and are finally before our destination: the Bebetor Mountain Range. We're currently taking a break near the foot of a mountain. There are no zombies in sight, but the soldiers are on the lookout, which lets me rest without staying on high alert.

"S-Say, Mizuha? Are you certain it was wise to take *that* person with us?"

A frightened Nady sits beside me. I follow her gaze to where Iris is diligently polishing my statue while cackling. "Hehehe...I will make you pretty-witty!" Is she *baby talking* to my statue?

Though she joined last minute, I couldn't make Iris the only person who went on foot, so I had her ride with Nady...and it sounds like she *immediately* made her idiosyncrasies known.

"She ordered me to ride directly behind you and was heavily panting the whole time. I honestly felt a little weirded out..." Nady confesses.

"Yeah, I'd say it was an unwise decision."

"Wh-Whaaat?!" Nady is shocked by my instant affirmation.

"She's not a bad person at heart. She just takes things a little too far."

"Do her actions really fall under *just* a little too far?" Nady asks, skeptical.

"Correction: she takes it WAY too far."

While that's the case, I can tell—more than I want to—that she cares about me, so I honestly can't *hate* Iris. I'm absolutely positive she will continue to do things that freak me out, but I hope we can continue to have a sort of friendship going ahead.

"Lady Mizuha, Sir Rosso has returned."

Soon after Lex tells me that, I spot Rosso running down the mountainside. His speed and agility are still topnotch. Not many people can run without making a sound like he can.

"I have just returned from my scouting mission, Boss Lady."

"Good work, Rosso. How were things on the zombie front?" I ask.

"I barely saw any," he reports. "Not that there's none, but we can push on without a hitch as long as we don't make any loud noises."

"It feels iffy that there's none in the mountains when so many have taken over Cladorca..."

"Maybe they're instinctively avoidin' the more strenuous inclines," Rosso speculates.

That will work in our favor if they are. I don't know the real reason why there are so few, but that doesn't change the fact. I look to Lex to make the call.

"Whatever the case may be, we cannot let this opportunity slip us by. We should advance as far as we can now," he said, giving the go-ahead.

Thus, we cut our break short and resume our forward march. Once we reach the foot of the mountain, we dismount our horses and lead them up the gentle slope by foot. The trees become denser as we approach the midway mark. Not only are they covered in foliage, but most of the leaves are rotten.

"...The leaves haven't fallen even though they have decayed?" Nady observes.

"Right? The leaves have fallen off mostly every other tree in the area."

Lex stands beside me as I'm looking up at the tree canopy with Nady. "Master Pino purposefully selected this path for us because it is farther from Cladorca and this natural canopy is ideal for hiding from the dragon on the off-chance it comes after us."

I bet Pino researched if the leaf canopy was still intact in advance. I have to take my hat off to our great scholar.

As I'm quietly offering my thanks up to Pino, I catch something disturbing out of the corner of my eye—Iris is swinging the bag with my statue in it so hard, I can hear it cutting through the wind.

"I will protect my goddess if the dragon comes!"

"Thanks... But I'm pretty sure that won't work against the

dragon, so don't throw it. I wish you wouldn't carry it around with you at all."

"I cannot concede on that point," she responds with a deadpan expression.

Will the day ever come when she will let go of the goddess—my—statue?

If nothing else, things are going smooth enough for us to have this ridiculous conversation. My feet are a little sore from walking uphill, but that's nothing compared to being chased by hungry zombies. If this keeps up, we should arrive at the floodgate sooner than expected.

My hopes are immediately dashed by the sound of rustling leaves and the even louder sound of wings flapping directly overhead. It's too loud and tumultuous to be naturally occurring wind.

"Hey, Lex? I have an *extremely* bad feeling about this."

"What a coincidence—so do I..."

I look up at the sky with Lex. I glimpse a massive shadow flying overhead through the gaps in the canopy. Since this is my second time encountering it, I don't doubt my eyes.

It's the same threat I met in Cladorca—a dragon.

◆ Chapter 20: The Floodgate was the Easy Job?

THE dragon circling overhead belches a thunderous roar that electrifies the air. Everyone, including me, is scared stiff. Fear disorients me, but Nady's calm voice centers me.

"I don't think the dragon knows we are here."

"Really? It's been circling right above us..." I point out.

"This is just a guess, but maybe it can't figure out our *exact* location." Nady observes the dragon through narrowed eyes. There's a considerable distance between us and the dragon, so I have no way of telling where it's looking.

"You have amazing eyesight," I say.

"N-Not really. I think just about any Lucor can see as well as I do."

Even if that's true, Nady is the only Lucor here, and the one who's using that talent to our benefit.

"Either way, it doesn't look like it's gonna leave anytime soon," Rosso says to Lex as they watch the sky together.

"Mayhap it has some means of knowing that we are in this general area," Lex speculates.

That's an interesting theory. It'd definitely make more sense why it's circling overhead if the dragon somehow knows we are still here. I just can't imagine what could be alerting it to our presence.

"It must be Goddess Mizuha's scent, no doubt about it," Iris suggests. "Even Iris can smell you from short distances."

"What the heck?! Don't make it sound like I smell!" I huff.

Great, her weird comment made everyone stare at me. Lex contemplates it for a moment then scrunches up his nose.

"She *does* smell..."

"UGH! Not you too, Lex!"

Do I really smell that bad? Has the foul odor from all the filthy zombies I've touched finally rubbed off on me? It can't have. While I can't bathe during expeditions, I do whatever it takes to stay clean. I probably—I absolutely do not smell...I think. I won't be

able to live another day if I don't remain positive about it.

"I-I didn't mean it that way!" Lex rushes out, noticing how upset he made me. "I meant you have the holy smell of Goddess Sadia's power within you. It wouldn't be strange for something with the Dark Djinn's power to be drawn to its polar opposite. I also believe that is why the dragon stayed locked on you last time!"

I understand what Lex is trying to say, and I agree with him. But, as a woman, I can't accept him explaining it away as "my smell" being the cause.

"I don't like you phrasing it like I smell *bad*, even if you say it's because of my powers..." I grumble.

"D-Don't feel bad! You smell good, Mizuha!" Nady desperately appeals.

Beside her, Iris agrees with a euphoric smile, and the soldiers quickly nod along, possibly out of pity. At least now I don't have to feel as bad, but it still doesn't sit well with me.

"Moving on," Lex says, taking control of the conversation, "if we don't do something, we will not be able to leave this spot."

"Yeah, but it'll know if we move..."

As Lex and I are racking our brains over how to get out of this predicament, the captain of the soldiers with us speaks for his unit. "We shall become bait, my lady," he offers. "The beast may be drawn to your scent, but surely creating enough of a racket will draw away its attention. Please advance with your team while we distract the dragon."

"But then you will be in danger—"

"We won't be able to accomplish our primary objective of *vanquishing* the dragon with it lingering in the mountains," he stresses. "Someone will eventually have to lure the dragon toward the main force for this to succeed."

He's absolutely right. Our journey to the floodgate is just one step in our overall objective. It defeats the purpose if the dragon stays here. Still, does that justify sending soldiers into danger?

I hear the dragon's rumbling roar from the sky, pressuring me to make a quick decision. My head hurts. The soldiers all offer me reassuring smiles. Did my distress show that bad?

"Please permit us to go. We all volunteered to partake in this operation for you, Lady Mizuha."

"I am *absolutely* opposed to surviving at the expense of another," I say through clenched teeth.

"We know, my lady. May we ask a favor in return?" Looking at their faces, I realize it's impossible to stop them. Thus, my answer is obvious.

"...If it's something I can do for you."

"We just want a bit of good luck," he says.

What they seek from me is a handshake. Though I didn't expect it, I exchange lengthy handshakes with all ten soldiers. I eventually finish shaking hands with the tenth person.

"We shall take our leave now," the captain of their unit says.

"...Please come back safely."

"We wouldn't have it any other way. After all, we have received your divine protection, Lady Mizuha."

The soldiers offer one final smile before mounting their horses and galloping up the steep slope.

"Come get us, DRAGON!"

Their perfect riding formation lends credit to their title as the elite of the elite. Seeing their resolve embodied in such a way constricts my heart.

May they return unharmed, I pray with all my heart, when—

"Are you *jealous*, dragon?! Lady Mizuha shook my hand!"

"Capture us if you want a *sniff* of Lady Mizuha!"

"Lady Mizuha! *Lady Mizuha!*"

The soldiers bellow my name as they spread out. The last guy is just repeating my name over and over. I'm not even sure how to react anymore—I have but one thing to say: "I regret ever being impressed by them."

"I-I believe this is necessary for morale..." Lex says, trying to defend them. "They succeeded in luring away the dragon. Surely it is because they shouted your name—"

"My name had nothing to do with it."

"A-Anyway, we should hurry, m'lady!"

However weird they might be, it doesn't change the fact they are drawing the dragon away despite the danger. I must hurry to make the most of their courage. I start running with Lex, Nady, Rosso, and Iris.

The detached force was mostly made up of soldiers, so our numbers have been reduced to just the five of us. We have no choice now but to trudge ahead with these members.

Rosso, who took the lead, shouts over his shoulder, "Boss Man, the path ahead is flat!"

“Everyone, on your horses!”

The farther we make it, the harder it will be for the dragon to catch us. I want to cover as much ground as possible while the dragon is distracted. The moment everyone finished mounting their horses and kicked them into a gallop, I hear a *deafening* sound. There’s no mistaking that noise after all the times I’ve heard it.

Cheeks twitching, I look at the sky behind me—and see the dragon gunning straight for me.

“Crap! Why is it coming after us?!” I cry.

“I don’t know! I can only guess it is coming after *you*, Lady Mizuha!”

“Me again?! Do I smell that *bad?!?*”

I’m worried about the soldiers who became bait, but my own survival comes first. The dragon flies close to the ground behind us, roaring. Spooked, the horses naturally run faster.

“Boss Man! The dragon shouldn’t be able to enter that cave!” Rosso points to a cave ahead of us. The opening is too small for the dragon to squish through. It’s only a matter of time before it catches up to us if we just keep running. It’s our only choice.

“Everyone, to the cave!” Lex commands just as black flames shoot from the dragon’s mouth and sear the ground in front of us.

The hot flames narrowly missed us, but Vianta stops running to rear up on her hind legs. Lex immediately spurs her into a gallop, but it’s too difficult to pick up the same speed after stopping.

The dragon is upon us. Its face is *right* behind me when I look back. Lex and I are reflected in its blood-red eyes. Its large maw opens to devour us. Lex manages to avoid its teeth by pulling Vianta’s reins hard left. We’re not out of the woods yet. The dragon consumes the trees, soil, and rocks near where we had just been and takes another snap at us. And then another. We dodged both by the skin of our teeth, but we can’t keep this up any longer.

“Boss Lady! Boss Man! Hurry!” Rosso shouts from inside the cave opening.

Nady’s horse races inside as well. We’re the last ones, but death is snapping at our heels. I’m not sure we can survive another bite. Except that bite doesn’t come. Did it give up?

I fearfully look back and see something even worse than its fangs—the dragon has opened its mouth to spew more black flames at us.

“Th-That’s a game ender if you fire that here!” I cry.

“Iris will protect her goddess!”

Something zips past my temple. I figured it out from Iris’s shout—my statue. It soars through the empty sky and dives hard into the dragon’s open mouth. The dragon writhes and starts choking like it got stuck in its throat.

I have mixed emotions seeing my statue meet such a brutal end, but it saved my life, so I’m not angry at Iris. Actually, I want to lavish her with praise.

“Boss Man, *now!*”

“Vianta!”

Vianta speeds up in accordance with Lex’s voice. She closes the final stretch to the opening and leaps inside. We rush deeper into the dark cave with Nady and the others who got there first. I hear the dragon raging behind us. But that’s it—it hasn’t miraculously found a way in the cave to attack us.

“Looks like we were right about it not being able to fit inside the cave,” Lex says.

“I seriously thought I was a goner...!” I exhale loudly and slouch in the saddle. We might be momentarily safe, but I can’t relax yet. “What do we do now...?”

I mean, the dragon’s waiting outside, and only pitch-darkness lies ahead.

◆ Chapter 21: Of Course, They're in the Mines too

“...IT’S still circling overhead, m’lady.”

Lex has returned from scouting the cave opening. Since we entered the cave, the dragon moved away from the entrance and started circling the area from the air. Nothing has changed since—just as Lex reported.

“I don’t think we can get to the floodgate the way we planned,” I say.

“Nor do I. We were lucky to escape the dragon the first time. We should proceed by thinking we won’t be so lucky the next time.”

“Yah, but it’s not like we can stay cooped up in here forever, right?” Rosso raises the biggest problem with a furrowed brow. He’s absolutely right. Staying in the cave keeps us safe from the dragon, but we don’t have enough supplies to last long.

We will have to leave eventually.

Lex pulls out a map. “As far as that problem is concerned, I checked the map Master Pino gave me and it seems this was once a coal mine. This is an old tunnel, but it seems to connect two different entrances. One leads out near Cladorca, and the other—”

“Oh! It’s near the floodgate!” Too happy to contain my excitement, I interrupt Lex.

“Precisely!” he answers with a smile.

“Meanin’ we’ve just gotta travel these tunnels! *Now* we’re talkin!” Rosso slams his left fist into his right palm to express his delight.

Though...not every problem is solved yet.

“But the horses are frightened,” Nady mutters in a concerned voice as she pats her horse.

“The tunnels have many areas that are too difficult for the horses to traverse. We must leave them behind,” Lex decides on the spot.

Bringing the horses could be more dangerous for them, but zombies still roam Torstana in droves. Not to mention there’s a

dragon nearby. I can't shake the feeling it might be even more dangerous to leave them.

"Will they be okay?" I ask.

"...Vianta is a smart girl. I am confident she will lead the other horses away from danger should the need arise."

His decision means leaving Vianta, who is like family to him, behind. Obviously it's tough on him. But Lex only grimaced for a fraction of a second before deciding.

"All right. I'll abide by your decision." I keep my response brief because I think that's better for Lex in the long run than trying, and failing, to console him.

Once we finish dividing up the bags we had tied to the horses, I face the cave's dark depths. "Ready to go?"

"Mizuha, shouldn't you do something about *her*?"

"...It's not nice to leave her behind, is it?"

I knew the problem without Nady having to point it out to me. I hadn't forgotten about *that* problem person, but I'm hesitant to speak to her the way she's acting. Giving in, I call out to Iris who's weeping on her knees near the cave entrance.

"Iris, how long do you plan to sit around?"

"My goddess statue...ahhh...! Waahhh...!" she wails.

"I'll leave you behind."

"How will I ever be able to fall *asleep* again...?"

"If you come right now, I'll pat you on the head."

"Coming!"

Wow, she got over that fast. And for that matter, I almost missed what she said, but does being unable to sleep without my statue mean she uses it as some sort of *hug pillow*? I can't imagine falling asleep hugging that hard and knobby thing, but I can picture Iris doing it, which is scary.

In any event, we have begun advancing deeper into the cave. Our formation consists of Lex at the vanguard, Iris reveling in her head massage from me, Nady behind us, and Rosso bringing up the rear. Only Lex and Rosso have torches.

"..It's uncomfortably quiet," I whisper.

"You would certainly expect there to be at least one or two zombies wandering around given Cladorca's population," Lex responds.

"Personally, I'd love not to run into any at all, but we should stay vigilant just in case."

Encountering zombies in the dark without being mentally prepared for it might give me a heart attack. Bracing myself, I keep repeating “zombies are gonna come from somewhere, anywhere” in my mind as Lex heads deeper inside the tunnel.

CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!

“Say, Nady? Do you hear something?” I ask nervously.

“Y-Yes. Sounds like metal striking rock—”

I hear a sudden loud crack from my right. When I look toward the source of the terrifying sound, I find a cracked wall. *Welp. This can't mean anything good.* No sooner do I think that then the crack spreads and the cave wall shatters in every direction. A pickaxe wielding zombie springs out.

“BWOAAAAHHHHH!”

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

The zombie raises the pickaxe in its right hand and brings it down on my face. Though not as agile as the nighttime zombies, it's plenty faster than the normos. At this rate, my eyeballs are going to be mined by a pickaxe! Just in the nick of time, the zombie disappears with a dull thud. Lex had intercepted the zombie with his shield, knocking it back into the hole it came from.

He looks over his shoulder at me with a panic-stricken expression. “Lady Mizuha! Are you unharmed?!”

“Y-Yeah... Thanks, Lex.”

I tried to be mentally prepared, but I didn't expect them to break through *the cave walls*. My heart nearly leaped out of my chest! And now it doesn't even get a chance to stop jackhammering in my ears because another zombie bursts its way through a different spot in the wall next to me. Lex knocks it back with his shield while I'm screaming.

“It's hard to believe, but it appears the zombies here are capable of breaking down the walls, m'lady!”

“Doesn't that make this entire cave a *death trap* then?!” I cry.

Rock cracks as if to prove my worst fears right. The sound is coming from the wall directly behind Rosso. Several pickaxe wielding zombies—miner zombies—spill from the newly formed hole.

“We're screwed if we stay here any longer! They'll box us in!” I shout.

“Pushing forward is our only option! Hurry! I shall cut open a path for us!” Lex bellows and the rest of us run right behind him.

However, the miner zombies seem capable of pinpointing our exact location as they smash through the walls and lunge at us with impeccable timing.

“We should stick together as close as possible so we don’t get separated!” I shout over all the noise. “Geh! Iris, you’re sticking too close! I can’t walk!”

“Iris doesn’t think this is close enough yet...!”

I hurry on with the group while prying Iris from my waist. We aren’t in the clear yet, but we have covered a decent amount of ground. I seriously thought my heart stopped for good when zombies started dropping on us from above, but it ended without incident thanks to Lex’s agile reflexes.

“The exit is at the top of those stairs!” he alerts.

Finally, after weaving around dozens of corners in the tunnels, we arrive at a large open space with a staircase. It’s built into the innermost wall and leads up to the right. Making it out of the cave will mean no more miner zombies jumping out of the walls and our overall freedom. Relief spreads over everyone’s faces, including mine.

Just then, there’s a loud crash as half the stairs are destroyed. Multiple miner zombies bust through the innermost wall. Surely it’s just my imagination playing tricks on me, but I swear their “BWOAH” sounds like cries of victory.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me! That’s the only way up!”

“Mizuha! They’re coming from behind!” Nady warns.

“We have to move before they box us in!”

Lex urges us to evacuate toward the right corner of the large hall—right under the exit. I know we couldn’t avoid it with our path of retreat cut off, but now we’re stuck at a dead end. Even after we moved to the corner of the hall, there’s an unending stream of miner zombies hacking their way through the walls and closing in around us.

Maybe it’s because they’re coming at us with pickaxes, but they’re far more intimidating than the normal zombies. Lex bravely steps forward and deflects them with his shield, buying us time by keeping the line. But he’s being pushed back by their sheer numbers. It’s only a matter of time before we’re surrounded.

We have to do something fast...

Rosso steps in front of me with a dead-serious expression while I’m trying to come up with a way out. “Boss Lady! Please give me

your spit!”

“Can you at least not ask for gross things at a time like this?!”

“I don’t want it for myself... I want you to purify this!”

“What is that? A rope?”

“Yeah! I spotted it on the ground when we entered the room and picked it up. Zombie decay has gotten to it, but it might be useable if you purify it.”

He has always been a man with a keen eye and a shrewd mind since the day I met him. Now I’m grateful for his tendency to swipe things. Why? Of course because—

“Great! We can use this to climb up the broken stairs!”

“I can scale the wall and pull you guys up with the rope,” Rosso offers. “So spit! Spit like your life depends on it! Gimme all the *spit* you’ve got!”

I really wish he would stop using the word *spit* several times in a row, but I don’t have time to correct him.

“Okay!” I say, taking the rope from him and moving further into the corner with it. I turn my back to everyone and privately spit on the rope, purifying it.

The poisonous color gradually fades from the brown rope. It didn’t repair the frayed sections, but it should be durable enough to pull one person up at a time.

“Here you go, Rosso!”

“Leave the rest to me, Boss Lady!”

Rosso winds the rope around his shoulder and quickly scales the cave wall. I’m surprised he can climb it so easily, even if it’s a rock wall with knobby sections that can act as footholds. I know this is a mean analogy, but it’s a bit like watching a lizard crawling up a wall.

He climbed the nearly seventeen-foot wall in no time. Then he wraps one end of the rope around his waist and lowers the other end.

“Hurry up!”

“Goddess Mizuha goes first!” Iris exclaims.

“Agreed! Mizuha needs to go first!” Nady urges.

I almost say I can go last, but bite my tongue at the last second. I’m not only the smallest person here, but I’m also the only one capable of purifying zombies. I feel guilty, but it’s smarter for me to reach safety first.

As it is, Lex is just barely holding back the miner zombies. We

can't waste time arguing over who goes first.

"Okay. I'll climb up fast!" I grab the rope and put my feet on the wall to climb up.

"AAGGGHHHH!" Rosso groans loudly above. It sounds like he's trying to brace himself to stop from being pulled down by my weight.

"A-Am I that heavy?! Sorry!"

"You ain't heavy! You're light as a feather...!" he calls down through gritted teeth.

"I'll try to take as much weight off you as I can!"

Rosso isn't a large or strong man by any means. Agility is where he excels. So lifting anyone would be a struggle for him—that must be it. I near the ledge while trying to save my self-esteem with those excuses. I place one hand on the ledge, swing my leg up, and roll onto the platform.

It wasn't the most ladylike move with a skirt on, but I didn't have much choice if I wanted to live. Apparently, I didn't have to be embarrassed about possibly flashing Rosso with him lying flat on his back gasping for air and all.

"I made it. Thanks, Rosso."

"No prob... Anytime. *COUGH! COUGH!*" Rosso shoves himself to his feet and grins at me. I'm grateful he's being considerate of my feelings, but the more he pretends to be okay, the greater the blow dealt to my self-esteem.

"No time to relax! We have to pull the others up quick."

"Right. I'll help!" I'm not that strong, but having some help is better than none.

"Who's next?!"

"I should go last...because I'm heavy," Nady answers sheepishly.

It's natural to weigh more when you're tall, and that's nothing to be ashamed of. She shouldn't be embarrassed, but her drooped ears and tail are just too cute.

"Then Iris is next!" Rosso shouts.

"Coming! Iris has been summoned to her goddess's side!"

"Why does that sound like you're dying and going to heaven?!"

Iris is pulled up vertically with her hands stretched out toward me like she's ascending toward heaven. It's surreal to watch, but we manage to get her up without incident. Iris then assists in lowering

the rope to Nady and lifting her up as miner zombies flock below us.



“Was I too heavy?” Nady asks.

“Not at all. You were feather-light.”

I’m pretty sure that’s because we had Iris’s superhuman strength pulling her up, but it’s insensitive to say that. Now everyone except for Lex is safely on the platform near the exit. He’s still fending off the miners. They have him completely surrounded with little room for error.

He’s out of time.

“Lex! We’re lowering the rope. Grab it!”

“Got it!” Lex repels a miner zombie with his shield, turns right around, and grabs hold of the rope. The four of us yank on the rope to pull him up. Out of nowhere, there’s a loud *snap* and we all fall on our butts.

“No way!”

The rope snapped!

It was old and frayed—it must’ve hooked and come undone on the rock ledge while pulling everyone up. Now we can’t help Lex get up here! I run to the ledge and look below.

“Lex!”

“Not a problem, m’lady!”

How is it not a problem when the only method for helping him up is destroyed? I don’t have to wonder for long because he shows me why it’s not a problem right away. Lex scales the wall by jumping off the knobby rocks Rosso had used as a foothold earlier. He easily makes it to the top and lands lightly beside me. I gape at him.

“Hey, Lex? Did you actually not need the rope from the start?”

“It appears not. Scaling the wall was easier than I thought once I tried it,” he responds with a sunny smile. He looks nothing like a man who was on the brink of death moments prior. Rosso is also staring at him with his mouth ajar.

“...Boss Man really is superhuman.”

“Yeah. I worried for nothing, which happens a lot with him...”
I say grudgingly.

“H-Have I done something to displease you, m’lady?”

“Nope, the opposite actually. I’m glad you’re safe.”

I was just stunned by his inhuman movement, which doesn’t detract from my joy at him making it out unharmed.

My moment of relief is cut short by Nady’s panicked voice.

“Mizuha! The zombies are climbing over each other’s bodies!” she shouts, looking over the ledge. “It won’t be long before they make it up here!”

“Crap! We have to hurry!”

I see light at the end of the tunnel when I turn around. The exit isn’t far away. We share a look and dash as fast as we can down the tunnel and hurtle outside the cave.

◆ Chapter 22: I Wish Someone Else Knew How I Feel

“**THE** dragon is nowhere in sight, m’lady!”

“Good! Then let’s hightail it outta here before the miner zombies catch up!”

We scramble out of the dark cave into the sunlight. We weren’t in there more than an hour, but it feels like an eternity since I was last outside. As much as I would love to rest, the zombies are still an immediate threat. After making sure the dragon isn’t around, we resume running to escape the miner zombies.

“Th-Think this is far enough...?” Exhausted, Rosso flops down on the ground after we’ve run for a while.

If it wouldn’t dirty my school uniform, I would be all for rolling in the grass and leaves right about now. Nady comes up beside me and puts her arm around my shoulder to support me.

“Are you all right, Mizuha?”

“Yeah, thanks. You—seem like you still have plenty of energy to spare.”

“I was trained to run through forests and mountains...”

Sounds like a Spartan upbringing to me. I won’t judge if it’s a good or bad way to bring up a kid, but at least all that training is paying off right now.

At any rate, I’m surrounded by people with serious stamina, including Nady, Iris—who is intently staring at me with a euphoric smile—and a completely unfazed Lex. Rosso is the only normal one.

“Our destination is near here, so this is a good spot to collect ourselves,” Lex says, looking into the distance.

Trees span out in every direction. I have no idea what he’s looking at, but I hear running water, although it was hard to tell at first because heavy panting drowned out the sound. We seem to be close to the water source.

Knowing we don’t have far left to go has the curious effect of giving me an extra energy boost. The rush of water grows louder as

we advance. We pass through the trees that had formed a sort of natural gateway into the next area, and we're greeted by a lake that reaches farther than the eye can see.

Looking to the far left, I see water overflowing from the many rugged rocks in the ground. In Japan, there are places where several tons of water pour out daily, and this spot is comparable to that. It's continuously flowing into the lake.

"It's amazing...and *reeks*..."

"Iris believes her goddess should spit saliva *right now*."

"Please don't place your hands under my mouth. I'll spit directly into the water, thank you." Am I the only one who doesn't want to touch other people's *spit*? No, the majority of people think that way. Repulsed by Iris's disturbing fetish, I redirect the conversation toward Lex. "I just have to purify the land around the spring, right?"

"Yes, m'lady. That should do the trick if Master Pino's experiments are anything to go by."

It doesn't matter how clean the pooled water is if the water flowing into it is infected. Pino did a bunch of experiments to solve that problem. Like Lex and I just discussed, purifying the land around the spring source should purify the spring water in the process.

"The only catch is that the purified state can only be maintained by a holy flower, but the purifying effects of the flower dwindle with time," Lex points out.

"In other words, it's a race against time. Everyone, face the other way. No looky-loos. You hear me?"

"Loud and clear. Please don't mind us."

Everyone offers the same assurances as Lex, so I immediately start the purification process. After purifying the surrounding area by wetting the ground, I spit into the lake. I hear a droplet hitting the water. As the ripples spread, the poisonous color instantly turns a crystal clear blue. The lake's purification is completed in the blink of an eye. Clean water flows from the spring without issue as well.

"You can look now! ...Ugh." I go ramrod stiff when I turn around. The others are scooping up the purified lake water and drinking it from their hands.

"Freshly made holy water is exceptional," Lex remarks.

"I'm alive again! My throat was hella parched!" Rosso exclaims.

“Incredible. So this is how purification works... It tastes *amazing* too!”

“Goddess! My goddess’s... *Glub, glub, glub!*”

Everyone looks so refreshed their exhaustion is nowhere to be found. There’s nothing better than for them to be reenergized. However, I wish they understood how I feel watching them drink from what I just spat in. For now, I settle for pulling Iris’s head out of the water and shoving the traumatizing incident out of my mind.

“All that’s left is planting the holy flowers nearby and we’re finished, right?”

“Yes, m’lady, that should prevent the surroundings from rotting.”

“Let’s hop to it then. Help me out, guys.”

Everyone takes a holy flower out of their bags and plants them all over the ground. It doesn’t take a lot of effort, so the job is completed without a hitch.

“The floodgate is the only thing left,” I say, dusting the dirt off my hands.

“The other side of the floodgate connects to the Noor River, which gently descends the Bebetor Mountains. And this side connects to the Cladorca Canal.”

As I listen to Lex’s explanation, I look at the two floodgates built at the edge of the lake. Both seem to have a mechanism to raise and lower the wall. The Cladorca Canal side is slightly down, while the river side is almost halfway down.

“I wonder if this is how they have always had it set to stabilize their water supply.”

“I heard from Master Pino that even taking a minuscule amount from here is more than enough to supply their whole city.”

They probably came up with this idea after desperately thinking about how they could live comfortably with the technology available to them. My world is more technologically advanced, but I honestly don’t know how most of it works. The floodgate is a fairly simple mechanism once you figure it out, but I’m genuinely impressed by what it can do.

“And now we are going to flood their city with it.”

“Yes, m’lady. We will fully open the Cladorca side and close the river side.”

I can’t imagine what an entirely flooded city will look like. Even though it’s for saving people from being zombies, I have

mixed feelings about causing a disaster like this.

I can't stop now though.

"This next part takes physical strength. Sir Rosso, may I ask for your assistance?" Lex asks.

"Sure thing. Time to put the last bit of elbow grease into it."

I guess we're going to start opening and closing the floodgates now. I roll up my sleeves, saying, "Let's do this," but Lex stops me.

"Please rest, Lady Mizuha."

"Why? I know I'm not that strong, but the more help the better —"

"We left our horses behind, which means we have to run as fast as we can down the mountain. I suggest you recoup as much stamina as possible."

"Ack... Good point. I g-guess I'll take you up on that then."

Putting up a strong front here and becoming a burden to them later voids the point. I feel bad for sitting this one out, but I'll leave it in their capable hands.

Lex smiles at me, then adds, "But it might be tough with just Sir Rosso and myself, so may I ask for your assistance as well, Miss Iris?"

"No. Iris wants to stay with her goddess," she declines on the spot.

I bet Lex brought Iris along for this one job, but his gamble backfired. He directs me a look that pleads with me to do something about it.

"I'll give you more head pats if you help out."

"I'll do it!"

Making her help with a simple reward makes me feel a tad guilty, but since she's happy about it, it can't be such a bad thing.

Meanwhile, Nady has walked over to Lex. "Excuse me, Sir Lex, but I would like to assist as well. I believe I have enough strength to be of service."

"Thank you for your offer, but please rest, Lady Nady. You should reserve your strength for when we need it most," Lex says, his eyes on the bow hanging from her shoulder.

Vanquishing the dragon is to be handled by the Lucors with the main force. But we might randomly encounter it again. Lex wants Nady ready in case that happens.

"...I will do that then."

Lex nods to Nady, then enters the stone building built next to

the floodgate with Rosso and Iris. The mechanism to control the floodgates is inside.

“Is it really okay for me to sit this one out?”

“Lex said it is, so don’t worry about it. Besides, I feel bad being the only one who gets to rest, so I’m glad you’re with me, Nady.”

The floodgate on the canal side moves while we’re chatting. It slowly descends, and the sound of rushing water increases.

“Look, Nady! They’re lowering the floodgate.”

The gate continues to slowly come down until it locks in place, and the dammed-up water aggressively spills out with tremendous speed. The water roars as it cascades through the opening.

Because of the distance to Cladorca, it’s impossible to see whether the water arrived safely from here. But the momentum is so strong, it’s a sure bet to flood the city.

“Wow! It’s more powerful than I thought.”

“I wonder what would happen if you closed this side without closing the river side...”

Nady and I are worried about the same thing, but everything is going according to plan. Even more water rushes into the canal once Lex and the others completely close the river floodgate. The sound is so intense it’s almost as if there have been constant thunderclaps.

“...This will definitely flood the area,” I mutter with my cheeks twitching.

“Y-Yeah. I wonder if the buildings will survive...”

Japan, where I’m from, is an island nation surrounded by the ocean. I’m all too aware that water poses a terrifying threat unlike anything else. Water rushing in on a city with strong momentum can easily bring down buildings. I wish we could’ve avoided this path, but we are doing it to purify Cladorca. Besides, buildings infested with zombie rot will eventually have to be knocked down and rebuilt anyway. We simply sped up the process... Yeah, I’ll just keep telling myself that.

Nady and I are watching the tumultuous water with bated breath when we hear footsteps behind us. Lex and the others are back.

“The plan went well, m’lady.”

“Yeah. *Frighteningly* well,” I respond and gasp when I glance behind me. Rosso looks like he’s about to faint and I can see the whites of Iris’s bulging eyes.

“I didn’t think it’d be that heavy...”

“Goddess, pet me...*pet me...*”

“G-Good job, guys.”

Those were huge gates holding back all this water pressure. I doubt it can normally be moved with the strength of just three people. Rosso and Iris’s fatigue is to be expected. Only Lex, who looks completely unfazed, is a superhuman monster.

Speaking of Lex, he’s staring into the distant sky. I follow his gaze to the setting sun.

“We don’t have much time. I’m sorry I can’t let either of you rest... We need to make haste down the mountain and regroup with the main force.”

◆ Chapter 23: Vanquishing the Dragon

"I don't know how we pulled it off, but we made it down the mountain. Rosso and the others look spent."

"They do, but we do not have any time to spare, m'lady..."

We succeeded in descending the mountain without encountering the dragon. My legs are killing me after running nonstop. Rosso and Iris seem even worse off than me. They're really feeling the effects of using up their strength to move the floodgates.

"I can keep going, Boss Lady..."

"Iris can run eternally if she gets Goddess Pats along the way—
COUGH! COUGH!"

It's plain as day that they're both bluffing. For that matter, Iris has never had the healthiest complexion, so now I'm even more worried she might croak on me.

"Look at them, Lex."

"...What am I supposed to do with you? All right, let's take a brief—"

Lex is cut off by a reassuring rumbling noise—the sound of hooves hitting the ground. I search left and right until I see a group of riders racing their horses along the foot of the mountain.

"**LADY MIZUHA!**"

"...Are those the soldiers who acted as bait?" I ask, opening my eyes as wide as possible to see them.

"Yeah, it looks like it," Nady answers.

The soldiers gallop up to us, pull on their reins, and come to a halt. A quick count gives me ten total—everyone who split off to become bait is here.

"I'm glad you are all safe. How did you make it here...?"

"The dragon immediately sensed you weren't with us, Lady Mizuha, as it quickly turned back... I deeply apologize for failing our mission," the captain says.

"You didn't fail. Besides, I'm relieved no one was hurt!"

"Your divine protection saved us, Lady Mizuha."

The soldiers all lay the hand I shook on their chests.

In the end, I wasn't able to transfer my unique smell to them. To me, it was the best possible result since it also meant the soldiers were unharmed and that my smell isn't transferable. But there's another question on my mind. I shift my gaze to the three riderless horses, including Vianta, that came with the soldiers.

"How did you find our horses?" I ask.

"We turned back right away and watched the dragon from a safe distance. Once it finally left the area, we checked where it had been circling and found a cave with your horses at the entrance, so we brought them with us," the captain explains.

"From there, we assumed you entered the cave and had already progressed deeper inside given how much time had passed. Since the tunnels were crawling with zombies, we determined you forced your way through and that we would stand a better chance of regrouping if we rode down the mountain from the floodgate."

"W-Wow! Your every guess was right!" When they lay out the details like that, it makes it sound easy to guess, but I doubt I would have thought as far ahead if I was in their shoes.

"Rejoice, men! Lady Mizuha is *impressed* by us!"

They always have to ruin the moment by making unprofessional comments like that, but it's not enough to dampen my respect for these men.

Lex gives Vianta a gentle hug before mounting her. Eyes on Cladorca, he raises his voice and commands, "Getting our horses back gives us a huge boost. We are going to run straight until we regroup with the main force!"



WE'VE made much faster progress since riding the horses. The foot of the mountain is out of sight, and in no time, we arrive near the plains where the massive zombie horde had me surrounded last time.

I can see Cladorca on my right, but it looks completely different from before. Water courses through the city built into the side of the mountain like a waterfall, streams down the gentle slopes, and washes over the plains where we are.

Although it's not enough to submerge all of the plains, most of

Cladorca is flooded. And, if the toppled, unmoving zombies are anything to go by, it seems safe to say this water has some holy effects.

“The plan seems to be working, m’lady.”

“Yeah. I knew we could count on Pino!”

We keep our horses cantering in the few places not yet submerged. Is the holy water taking effect? The peculiar odor and fog clinging to the plains has begun to fade. Now we can see clear into the distance. I spot troops from the main force just ahead. Many of them are shooting arrows at the dragon aggressively flying around them.

“They’ve already started!” Nady shouts, her horse coming alongside Vianta. Everyone squeezes their calves and heels, cueing their horses to increase speed and lengthen their stride.

“So the dragon came back here after all...” I say, careful not to bite my tongue.

“It seems to have a habit of attacking anyone who nears Cladorca,” Lex responds, calmly analyzing the situation though there’s a sharp gleam in his eyes. He’s mentally preparing himself for the intense battle ahead.

I was worried about the plan not working if the dragon stayed around the mountain, but we luckily don’t have to change anything now.

I hear the main force’s shouts more clearly as we approach. Once we are near enough to feel the intense atmosphere prickles our skin, Theos’s voice powerfully booms across the field.

“Holy Priestess Mizuha is here! Now, Lucor Warriors! Shoot your arrows with a brave heart!”

Arrows fly from every single Lucor, who are riding in a perfect spread out formation, and they all strike the dragon’s wings without missing. Seeing as the arrows have pierced the dragon’s hide, Pino’s altered arrowheads are working according to plan.

I get that everything has gone perfectly, but I’m in shock—the dragon is felled as soon as I join the fray. I honestly didn’t expect to pull it off this well.

“Holy smokes!”

“Lady Mizuha, now’s the time! Hold on tight!”

Lex gives Vianta’s side a quick tap until she’s galloping full speed. The distance to the fallen dragon shrinks in a flash. By the time we are within distance to clearly see its ferocious fangs, the

dragon writhes wildly and turns its mouth toward us.

“Ack! Don’t use that here!” I yell at it.

It’s almost as if the dragon was waiting for me to get close to blast me with its black fire breath. We’ll all be caught up in the blast if it does that here and now. The threat of imminent death is postponed by a volley of arrows piercing the dragon’s head. A unique shattering noise echoes from the glass affixed to the arrowheads.

“Do it now, Holy Priestess!”

Compelled by Theos’s thundering voice, Vianta drives Lex and me forward.

Just as Vianta runs past the dragon, I lean all the way to the side with my hand out and touch one of the finger spikes on its wing. I’m surprised by how hard it feels compared to the fleshy human zombies and Boneless Hams, but the sensation is a surefire indicator I made contact with it.

I look back as soon as we’ve passed it. A great number of seams emerge on the dragon’s whole body—the same as what happens with the Boneless Ham. What comes next is exactly the same too. After emitting a flash of light, living creatures of various sizes fall like rain from the dragon’s body. All birds from the looks of it.

I had considered the possibility after discovering the zombie birds, but to think the dragon really was formed by a large number of zombified birds.

“We defeated it, right?” I mutter, staring at the birds that had once made up part of a dragon as Vianta slows her gait.

“Yes, we did, Lady Mizuha. The dragon has undeniably *perished!*”

Cheers erupt from the troops after Lex’s declaration. It’s quite the earthshaking noise when over three hundred soldiers let out victory cries. No one tells them to lower their voices despite the danger of attracting zombies. At least the nearby ones are currently slowed by holy water—they pose no immediate threat.

“We did it, Lex!”

“Indeed! Everyone fought valiantly to ensure this victory.”

While I’m sharing in the moment with Lex, a person dressed in gaudy armor with an even more ostentatious personality—Keith—walks over to us. He raises his sword toward the heavens and boasts of his feats.

“Did you witness it, MiZUha?! Did you witness the moment my beautiful swordsmanship felled the dragon?!”

“No, I didn’t even see you on the battlefield. Besides that, a sword isn’t capable of reaching a dragon flying high off the ground,” I demur.

“Believe it or not, my swordsmanship released the arrows into the sky!”

“Bows release arrows, not swords. And it’s the Lucors who shot them, not *you*.” I head for the Lucors as I dryly correct Keith and his usual inability to hold a decent conversation. The Lucors are reveling in relief and joy as well. I address Chieftain Theos first. “Thank you for taking down the dragon! You have excellent accuracy!”

“We Lucor merely fulfilled our duties. I still do not believe this is enough to repay the debt we owe you, Holy Priestess, but it pleases us to have been of service to you.”

“You did more than that! This operation succeeded because of your people! Thank you very much!” I convey my gratitude without hiding my enthusiasm.

Though the majority of the Lucors smile back at me, Theos’s expression remains stern. Then I realize his gaze has shifted from me. I follow it to Nady. He must be curious about what happened during her time with me.

“Nady saved me on countless occasions during our separate mission,” I state.

“...I see,” is all Theos says in return. There’s a hard edge to his eyes that are also brimming with sadness. I get the feeling he’s guessed that Nady has yet to shoot a single arrow.

“Mizuha, I—”

“I only made it this far because you were with me. Thank you.”

“...I guess.”

I know it’s crafty of me, but I didn’t let her finish what she had to say. It doesn’t matter if she shot an arrow or not, Nady is my dear friend who went through a lot of scary things for me.

“I know we would all love to celebrate our victory longer, but we don’t have much time before the sun sets. We accomplished our objective to vanquish the dragon. Let us return with this great victory!” Lex shouts in a loud enough voice to reach all the troops.

Everyone agrees to the plan and prepares for the ride home.

The troops are a bit spread out, perhaps because they are still embracing the high of victory. It's not a big deal though with the zombies pickled in holy water and our biggest threat—the dragon—gone.

They deserve a little leeway to let their hair down. I'm sure everyone thinks the same because none of the commanding officers censure them. But perhaps we celebrated a little too soon.

A maddening *roar* incites fear in me that chills me to the bone. I apprehensively look up and my eyes go round.

“H-How?! We just defeated it!”

A ginormous black creature is flying toward us—its form is undeniably that of a dragon.

◆ Chapter 24: That Dragon

“NO, Boss Lady, this is a *different* dragon!” Rosso shouts, pointing to where soldiers are packing up the birds that had formed the defeated dragon. It can’t be the same dragon with all the birds still purified. As Rosso said, it’s valid to view this as a different dragon.

But then where in the world did it come from?

“Look, Mizuha!” Nady calls to me. “The last dragon we defeated had blood-red eyes, but this one has *blue* eyes.”

It’s too far for me to tell the color of its eyes, but if Nady says so, then I believe it. And I remember a blue-eyed dragon. I saw it up close and personal—there’s no way I could mistake it.

“This must be the dragon that was patrolling the mountains!” I exclaim.

“Then there have always been two of them...?” Lex concludes, his face grim.

It’s not strange for there to be two if there’s one, but I never imagined them to be in the same area. Though despair surges within me, an inspiring voice instantly dispels it.

“It doesn’t matter how many there are, for we Lucors can just bring it down again!”

The Lucors release a volley of arrows at the new dragon. Over thirty arrows soar in an arc toward their target. It’s breathtaking every time I see it, but the result is different this time.

“It’s not working?!”

“No, they aren’t even getting close!”

“It’s that damn mist! It’s repelling the arrows!”

Mist enshrouding the dragon’s body repels all the arrows. The last dragon didn’t have this skill. Panic begins to spread through the Lucors until a single arrow zipping through the sky quells it. Chieftain Theos’s arrow.

It flies faster and harder than any arrow before it and breaks through the mist unhindered. Glass shatters on impact.

“Chieftain Theos did it!”

“But the arrow didn’t hit it!”

The excitement lasted for but a brief moment before more stunned cries rise from the troops. While the arrow succeeded in getting past the mist, it lost momentum and fell out of the sky before it struck the dragon. Theos promptly releases a second arrow, which has the same disappointing result.

“No way! Not even Theos can pull it off? We don’t stand a chance then!” I shout just as the dragon decides to repay us for all the arrows.

After roaring until the air tingles, it starts blowing black flames on the ground below it. The fire breath creates a furrow-like line in the ground that lasts for a long couple of minutes. Black flames scorch the earth as if drawing a picture.

“I’m marrying MiZUha after our triumphant return to the capital! I cannot die yet!”

“I made a promise to be spoiled silly by my goddess once we get back home! Iris won’t die in a place like this!”

Keith and Iris flee from the blast while shouting their delusional reasons to live. Aside from them, a large number of soldiers are scattering in every direction to avoid the black flames of doom.

Blackness blankets the area, and the ground is shaking like there’s an earthquake. It’s such an apocalyptic scene that I wouldn’t doubt it if you told me the world is ending right now. Our complete annihilation is inevitable at this rate.

“Lex!” I shout, seeking his advice.

“We were never prepared for *two*!” he immediately responds. “We shouldn’t push our luck here!” He pulls on the reins, turning Vianta around, and raises his voice over the chaos. “Retreat! Everyone, retreat at *once*!”

Following his orders, everyone mounts their horses and spurs them into a gallop. But the black flames make it impossible to establish any kind of formation. Everyone scatters in whatever direction they can without caring about what the person next to them is doing. There’s just no latitude to fuss about formations right now—escaping the dragon comes first.

All our allies are quickly moving away from Cladorca. Vianta finally also crosses the line where the dragon stopped chasing me last time. If it’s the same as before, it should give up the chase here, but after the blue-eyed dragon stops scorching the area, it flaps its wings and pursues us with a vengeance.

“Are you kidding me?! The other dragon didn’t follow us!”

“This one might not have any inclination to protect Cladorca, m’lady!”

Considering it flew down from the mountains, this one might not have any area restrictions. It roars in hot pursuit of us as if to say “You aren’t getting away!” Unlike last time, there are people all over the place that it could go after. However, the dragon is on a set course for—

“ME AGAIN?! I knew it liked me, but this is *too much!*”

“Please hold on tight, Lady Mizuha!”

As soon as the dragon is close enough to cast a shadow over us, it alternates taking swipes at Vianta with each of its front talons. Lex’s skilled handling of the reins manages to pull us out of danger each time, but my whole body tenses in the saddle at the sound of claws slashing through the air. One hit from that and I’m dead. I glimpse the dragon’s bared fangs out of the corner of my right eye.

“AAAHHH!”

Now it’s snapping its jaws! We avoid its teeth thanks to Lex again, but it doesn’t matter how many lives I have. If this keeps up, I’m a goner. I want to do something about it, but there’s nothing I can do when I’m just a passenger on Lex’s horse. And it’s a huge mystery if I’m actually capable of doing anything to that dragon in the first place.

As I’m racking my brain, everything in front of me suddenly turns pitch-black. The dragon spewed its black flames in front of Vianta, blocking her escape route. We didn’t have time to avoid this attack. My body is violently struck by something.

I’m too dazed for the first few seconds to figure out what just happened. But I’m still conscious, and clearly alive. Plus, while the impact was hard, I’m not in pain. Wondering why, I open my eyes. Lex is pillowing me in his arms. No wonder I’m okay. However, Lex is covered in injuries from taking the brunt of the blow.

“L-Lex! Are you okay?! I’ll heal you right now with my left hand—”

“Healing puts too much of a strain on your body, Lady Mizuha. I am...all right... Please...run away!!”

“I can’t run and leave you—” I swallow the rest of what I was going to say.

The dragon is after *me*. Lex will get eaten along with me if I stay next to him. After a brief moment of hesitation, I dash away

from him at full speed. But a dragon flies faster than a human's legs can run—the distance between us is closed in a flash.

Landing right beside me, the dragon opens its big mouth. Black miasma swells up from its throat. It's going to blast me with its fire breath attack.

Since coming to this world, there have been countless occasions when I have thought my time was up. I have never been more aware of it than at this moment.

I'm sorry, Dad, Mom, and I guess Big Bro while I'm at it. I don't think I'll be able to see you again...

I finish offering my final farewells to my family just as the misty black miasma surges up inside the dragon's mouth. The dragon tilts its head back to release the flames, when a single arrow slams into its eye, shattering glass and membrane. It lets out a deafening shriek, and the swirl of black miasma dissipates inside its mouth.

For a second, I can't wrap my head around what happened. How could an arrow pierce through the dragon's mist and into its eyeball when not even Theos succeeded in hitting it? Heck, I don't even know who shot the arrow. Countless questions flood my mind.

But they're immediately washed away by the instinctive need to run. To my dismay, I'm too scared to move.

"Mizuha! Take my hand!" a frantic voice instructs me.

I look up to see Nady riding toward me. She stops right beside me and pulls me onto the saddle in front of her. Then she holds the reins with her arms coming around my back and spurs the horse into a fast gallop.

"Th-Thanks!" I say breathlessly. "Was that arrow yours...?"

"I wanted to save you so bad...my body moved on its own!"

My guess it was Nady's arrow was right on the mark. Not only did she shoot through the mist covering the dragon, which no one else could, but her arrow also punctured its tough outer layer. I saw her exceptional skills during the archery demonstration, but it looks like Nady's arrows have more power behind them than anyone else.

She still seems to struggle with shooting living creatures—even if they're zombies. I can see the sadness and torment in her eyes. Guilt rises in me despite my joy over being saved.

However, fear soon overwrites every other emotion. The dragon flies just off the ground and instantly closes the distance between us again.

“You’ll get eaten with me, Nady...!” I cry.

“Yeah. I know we can’t outrun it. So I’ve come prepared...!” Nady slides the bow off her shoulder as she speaks. She plans to shoot at it again. That’s great, but what’s she going to do about the horse’s reins? “Take the reins, Mizuha!” she orders, answering the question for me.

“M-Me?! That’s not a good idea, Nady!”

Since the purification of Grantz Kingdom has started settling down, I’ve had Lex let me hold Vianta’s reins in the name of experiencing it. But that was solely for fun, and at a slow trot at that. I highly doubt I can hold on to the reins of a horse galloping so fast I can hear the wind rush by. Especially not with a zombie dragon on our tail.

But how can I say no when I see Nady staring down the dragon? She’s attempting to do what she’s not good at—for me. Then I need to do the same for *her*.

“Turn the horse left when I give the signal! He’s a good boy. He should respond if you lightly tug the reins in the direction you want him to go!”

“O-Okay!”

Stop thinking about how to ride well. I just need to think about holding the reins and keeping him steady. That way Nady can get a clear shot!

As if to mock my once in a lifetime attempt at being plucky, the dragon rapidly moves in on us, slashing its lethal talons to reap our lives.

“Oh god, oh god! GAAAAAH!”

It spits a beam of black flames while it’s at it. Either the horse is just that skilled or sheer luck was on our side, because we managed to avoid it. Nady will never be able to find the right timing to shoot with it bombarding us with one attack after another. If only we could distract the dragon for a moment...

Then, as if in answer to my prayers, a volley of arrows fly at the dragon from both sides. The Lucors have come to our rescue. Every arrow is repelled, but it’s enough to annoy the dragon. Enraged, it roars at both sides.

“Why...are you all here?!”

“Don’t slow down! You’re the Chieftain’s daughter! Finish it off already!” one of the young Lucor men yells at Nady. He’s the one who always says mean things to her. The other Lucors who had

demeaned her are also assisting in distracting the dragon.

“Okay!” Nady quickly gets over her shock and cracks a smile.

They have finally accepted her. I can’t help being thrilled for my best friend. Not that now is a good time for that.

“Now, Mizuha!”

“On it!”

I yank the reins to the left, and the horse swiftly turns. Out of the corner of my left eye, I glimpse the dragon going berserk on the Lucors. Then I hear Nady take a deep breath. It’s over in a second. She quietly releases the arrow from the bow. It soars through the air and bloodily skewers the dragon’s left wing.

The dragon lets out a hiss of breath like a whimper. “We did it!” I whoop, but Nady doesn’t think it’s over yet. She releases arrow after arrow into it without pause. Shattering glass echoes through the woods, accompanied by the sound of arrowheads puncturing a thick hide. Ten arrows are sticking out of it when I look.

“It still hasn’t fallen?!” I groan at the dragon that’s still flying overhead. At least it’s flying slower than before. It should come down eventually if we can keep this up.

The dragon suddenly lets out an enraged roar as if to say it won’t let us get away with hurting it any longer, and it begins spraying the area with black flames. The Lucors scatter. Fortunately no one took a direct hit, but our advantage has been completely squashed.

The moment the arrows stopped, the dragon turns back to me. Sights set, it roars louder than ever. It was too much for our horse—it starts to buck wildly in fear. Seemingly waiting for that moment, the dragon blasts us with its fire breath. It’s going to be a direct hit!

“Please, move!”

I yank on the reins. Did that do the trick? Or was it the horse’s instincts? Either way, he runs at the last second. But in his panic, the horse stumbles and falls. Nady and I are tossed out of the saddle and roll on the ground.

A blast of black zips passed the space right beside us at the exact same time. Apparently, we fell out of sight. Nady seems all right despite hitting the ground too. We’re in the worst possible situation, but we escaped the worst-case scenario.

“My quiver...!” Nady cries just as I sigh in relief.

It looks like she lost her quiver during the fall. To make

matters worse, the black flames crisped it, arrows and all. And Nady's arrows were the only attack that worked on the stupid dragon!

Borrowing someone else's would be best, but the Lucors fled too far. The dragon will reach us before we get to any of them. We're out of options.

"Nady!" booms the voice of hope.

"Father?!"

A stern-faced Lucor—Theos—rides over to us. Did he run in our direction when the dragon scattered his people? He's arrived with impeccable timing! He draws an arrow from his quiver and holds it up.

"This is the last one! Finish it!"

"...Yes, sir!"

Theos hands off the arrow to Nady without stopping his horse, and changes directions as he gallops by us. He charges straight at the dragon. I question his sanity, but soon realize he's trying to draw its attention.

"Come and get me, wicked dragon! The mighty Theos will be your opponent!"

Theos's howled challenge seems to have reached the dragon as its eyes turn to him. Nady nocks the arrow and prepares to fire it in the interim. But she stops with the arrow pulled back, unable to release it. On closer look, her face is taut. She must be nervous knowing it's the last arrow.

"Hey, Mizuha, I'm sorry to ask this of you right now, but..." she starts.

"What is it?"

"I need courage. Will you place your hands on my hips?"

"Er... I hate to say this, but my hand stinks from touching the other dragon. Actually, it reeks something *nasty*. You okay with that?"

"I am. Because it's your hand—my *best friend's* hand."

Her response is both immediate and the best thing I could've asked for. From the moment I met Nady, I had a sense that "I can surely get along with this person." It seems my instincts were on the money.

"Thanks. I'm happy to help then!"

I place my hands on Nady's hips, making sure not to hinder her ability to shoot.



The dragon has already lost interest in Theos. Without any arrows, he's no threat to the flying beast. Makes sense why it wouldn't care about him. But he offered the best back up he could as not only the Lucor's Chieftain but also as a parent.

"Nady, now!

Nady releases the arrow from her right hand in time with Theos's shout. The arrow has already reached the dragon by the time my ears register the twang of the bowstring. Recognizing Nady's arrows alone as a threat, the dragon immediately tries to evade it. But the arrow strikes before it can flap its wings. It hits in a different spot from before—the head, and not just anywhere in the head, but between the eyes.

Nady seems to have targeted its head because it continued to fly no matter how much damage its wings took. In fact, it's proven effective in the very next moment.

The dragon starts to fall, roaring so loud it could split the heavens.

The giant was finally grounded.

◆ Chapter 25: The Lucors' Strongest Warrior

THE dragon writhes violently on the ground but is too injured to take flight again. I heal Lex with my left hand first. Then, under everyone's vigilant protection, I cautiously near the wounded beast and touch it.

The purification is a success.

Between its mist shield and terrifying endurance levels, this dragon was quite different from the last one, but everything else went the same after purifying it. After emitting a dazzling flash of light, it splits into a flock of birds. What used to be a dragon has disappeared.

"We did it! We *won!*"

"You were the coolest, Boss Lady! Miss Nady has got game too!" Rosso exclaims.

"The Goddess has won the day! Iris's goddess is the *bestest!*"

"Did you all behold my glorious strike that slayed the dragon?! That was the power of my and MiZUha's love!"

Everyone loudly celebrates now that the imminent threat is gone. Ignoring the people who are still uttering delusions, I can understand the excitement the rest feel after taking down a second powerful dragon. That said, we aren't completely out of danger yet. I bring my index finger—from my non-reeking hand, of course—to my lip and address the group.

"Keep it down, guys!"

The zombies infesting Cladorca look smaller than black beans in the distance, but they are slowly ambling towards us. It seems the holy effect has worn off the spring water as most of the zombies have regained their usual plodding gait. A good number have already moved out of the water. It's definitely not safe anymore.

"Retreat as soon as we finish collecting the purified birds! Please make haste!" Lex commands.

The soldiers quickly get to work. They divide up hundreds of bags and gather the birds inside them. I feel bad about how roughly they are being treated, but we can't risk them flying off and forming

a third dragon.

I wonder if this world has as many birds as Earth does. If they do, then we have a frightening future filled with dragons ahead of us. As I'm shivering from that horrible premonition, I hear a whole lot of heavy panting. Searching for the source, I spot my followers arriving at our location looking beat.

"Haa...haaa...we finally made it..."

"G-Good. Everyone, take up your st-statues. We will protect Goddess Mizuha...!"

"Yeah..." the fanatics chant in feeble voices. I have a lot to say about them raising my statues in the air as blunt weapons, but they look so pathetic right now, I can't do it.

"Hey guys. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we just finished vanquishing the dragons and are about to head back home now," I say to them.

"H-How could this be...?"

"So... I need you to turn right around and march back home."

I feel sorry for them, but they're the ones who chose this. They have no choice but to run the way back home too. As I'm watching their forlorn backs trudge off toward the royal capital, something I glimpse out of the corner of my eye catches my interest. Nady and Theos are facing each other, awkward as can be.

"...Father."

"You did well, Nady."

Nady's eyes bulge as if she never expected to hear those four words from her father's mouth. Receiving his praise should make her happy, but her expression is more pained than anything.

"This experience has taught me that I still can't *stand* shooting a living, moving creature," she confesses. "It's just too hard for me when I think it stopped moving because of me..."

"...You fulfilled your duties gloriously. Your life is yours to live henceforth."

Those words are meant to push her away, but Theos said it with his daughter's wellbeing in mind. From the bottom of his heart, he wants her to live life her way, free from obligation as his daughter. Nady has deep-set reservations against shooting living creatures, so I expected her to happily accept Theos's gift of freedom.

"I hate it, but...but by defeating that dragon...with the skills you taught me, I was able to save the life of my best friend."

“...Nady.”

“Therefore, I will continue to be an archer, to protect what matters most to me.”

For the first time, Nady looks her father in the eye despite having always looked away from him. Her tightly squeezed fists show just how much courage she needed to say it. Driven by the unnameable emotions bubbling up from deep within me, I throw my arms around Nady’s neck.

“M-Mizuha?”

“I just had to hug you! Sorry if I smell...”

“There you go bringing up your smell again. I told you I don’t mind it.” She squeezes me back with a blissful smile.

Many of the Lucors called Nady a coward, but I know that’s not true—she’s just kind through and through!

“My mind remains unchanged. You are free to choose whichever path suits you,” Theos repeats. He didn’t really change his wording all that much, but his expression has softened. The soft smile blossoming on Nady’s face proves it.

“...I will!”

The question of whether Nady uses the bow or not is up to her. Whatever she chooses, she will always be my friend. The fact that her father has finally acknowledged her is the best thing that’s happened today. Nady and I share a look and smile.

Meanwhile, Lex and the soldiers seem to have finished wrapping up preparations to ride home. Almost everyone has gathered in the area. They seem mostly unharmed. Even so, this was still an extremely dangerous operation.

I raise my voice so everyone around can hear. “Thank you all for partaking in this mission for me!”

◆ Chapter 26: Epilogue

“UGGHH... How many more trips do I have to make?”

I slump back in a chair on top of Grantz castle’s rooftop garden. I came out to get some fresh air and blow off some steam building up from my chaotic daily routine.

“It’s backbreaking work,” I whine.

“You would have a much easier time if you could purify them all at once, but you can only do so many a day, m’lady,” Lex consoles.

Half a month has passed since we vanquished the two dragons. I have since made frequent visits to purify the Cladorca zombies. The expedition is the same each time: return to Grantz’s royal capital with everyone we manage to save.

I wish we could set up basecamp next to the city, but we prioritized safety over accessibility. Covering that much ground roundtrip for two weeks takes a toll on the body just the same. It’d be a *thousand* times faster if we could drive there on a paved road, but that’s the same as asking for the moon.

“Either way, I’ll do my job till the last person.”

“You are a remarkable woman, Lady Mizuha.”

“I volunteered to do it. Aren’t you more exhausted than I am, Lex? Unlike me, you’re also luring and knocking down zombies. How are you holding up?”

“You needn’t fret over me. I have been trained for this.”

Lex pounds his right fist against his chest. That’s superman Lex for you. He’s not pretending to be okay when he’s not—he *actually* isn’t fatigued. That said, even if he’s not physically tired, he must be feeling the mental strain. And yet he has a special kind of strength that stops him from complaining or scowling. Having this man by my side encourages me to work even harder.

“...Thank you for everything,” I mutter quietly. Saying it out loud is embarrassing. Lex looks stunned by my abrupt thanks, though he immediately responds with a sunny smile.

“It is only natural for me to assist you as your knight, Lady

Mizuha.”

“That’s true, but that’s not what I mean...”

“You may set your fears at ease. Your feelings have reached me unhindered.”

It’s my fault for not coming out and saying it, but I’m pretty sure my feelings haven’t reached him at all. I wasn’t thanking him as a priestess to her knight. Agh! What a pain in the butt. I suck at these things! I just switch the subject to escape my mounting frustration.

“By the way, what happened with that one *problem*?”

“What *problem* might that be?”

“You know, the thing with Kodbyen’s family. I heard we located them during the last expedition.”

Every single person we purify in Cladorca has extensive background checks done on them by Grantz Kingdom. The lucky ones often reunite with their family the same day. Even if we can’t find their family that first day, having records on everyone allows for smooth reunification every time we bring back more people.

“Ah, that matter? I was planning on officially reporting it to you later. Long story short, they were able to safely visit with him. Mr. Kodbyen was overcome with joy.”

“I see. Good for them.”

“He expressed his gratitude to you as well, Lady Mizuha. He said, ‘Tell her thank you from the bottom of my heart.’”

My intention has always been to purify the whole world. But I only had my eyes set on an ambiguous goal and failed to see the problems that might arise between the various factions. It isn’t a stretch to say that Kodbyen was the trigger that made me think seriously about this world and my role in it going ahead. It was horrible getting kidnapped, but I’m genuinely happy if that man and his family have been safely reunited.

“Wait, what do you mean they visited with him? He hasn’t been let out of prison yet? I think you can release him now.”

“Unlike the time with Miss Iris, you are now recognized by His Majesty as the official Holy Priestess of our kingdom. Ample punishment is due for the crime of kidnapping you, or else we risk future cases of it.”

“Ah... I guess that plays a role in this too, doesn’t it?”

I’m the most affected by this matter. As someone who is constantly being protected, I can’t tell them to lessen his sentence in

good conscience.

"Nevertheless, he did not directly *harm* you. He shouldn't have to serve a long prison sentence," Lex says to console me.

"Glad to hear it. Being with your family is the best thing in the long run."

Not that I have any right to say that after I chose to stay in another world when I had the opportunity to go home. Still, I believe that a family who wants to be together should be.

"Big Sister, would you like to have tea together?" a lyrical, soft voice asks. Cia is standing in the pillared corridor connecting to the garden. Beside her is a trolley cart with a variety of tea sets.

"Did you prepare all that for me, Cia?"

"I did. You've been busier than usual lately, so I chose a relaxing tea that helps ease fatigue. Would you like some?"

She's such a good girl! Knights and maids are watching over her from a distance. It's easy to see she asked them to give her space to be with me. I just want to squeeze the cuteness out of her!

"Heck yeah! I mean...yes, please. I would love to have some tea," I say, correcting my language for royal tea time.

"I'm ever so glad you said yes! Please wait just a moment. I will bring it right to you." Cia lifts the tray under the tea set with both hands. Lex springs into action to help her before she hurts herself, but is stopped by her sharp glare. "I can handle it myself, Lex."

"B-But Princess—"

"Please, Lex. This is the only thing that I can do."

Cia always feels contrite about not being able to participate in the expeditions. Her statement just now brims with the sentiment. She takes slow, careful steps toward me, her brow adorably furrowed with the effort. The tray sways dangerously from beginning to end, but she manages to safely place the tea set on top of the garden table. A sigh of relief slips through her small, pert lips. Her every gesture is cuter than the last.

"You really are my happy place, Cia."

"Y-Your...h-happy place? I don't know what that means, but I'm happy if it means I'm helping you."

Cia tilts her head and smiles when I accidentally let my inner thoughts slip out. If angels exist, I've never been more certain they would be like Cia than I am at this moment.

"Oh, I don't see Miss Nady with you today," Cia observes while

preparing the tea. There are four cups—she must’ve been planning to serve Nady too.

“She’s returned to the Lucor village briefly to greet her mother. You know, because we’ve got *that* event tomorrow.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

She understands without me even explaining what it is. That just goes to show how big of an event tomorrow is for Nady—and me.



THE next day a great many people have gathered in the royal audience chamber. Nobles and royal knights make up the majority. The rest are essentially the heroes of our last mission—the Lucors. They are kneeling before the king, who is seated upon the throne.

I’m watching them from a corner of the chamber near the throne with Lex.

“I hear you made huge contributions toward defeating the dragons during the last big quest.”

“We merely returned the debt we owed to the Holy Priestess for saving us,” Theos says reverently in response to His Majesty.

“The Holy Priestess is essential to this world’s survival. You have rendered this world a great service protecting her. Lucors, please accept this small reward.”

“We humbly accept.”

This ceremony is being held to reward the Lucors for playing a huge role in vanquishing the dragon. The Lucors accept the numerous wooden boxes and velvet bags Grantz’s soldiers bring before them. I can only imagine what expensive treasures are inside. Speaking of which, I remember being asked to purify the treasure room a while back—ugh, don’t think about it. No one wants to know that their rewards were washed in my spit, and I absolutely don’t want to be the one to tell them.

“Nady Ol Theos La Quim Rom Lucor, come forward.”

“Y-Yes, Your Majesty,” Nady squeaks in response to the king calling her name.

I can tell how nervous she is at a glance. Is she trying to make herself look smaller? Her ears are flicked back against her head and her tail is curled between her legs. Though I’ve gotten used to it,

I'm still smitten by Nady's adorable, catlike gestures.

"My soldiers have told me a great deal about your feats. They say you alone felled the dragon that gave everyone else a run for their money."

"It is true that my arrow brought down the dragon. However, my strength alone would not have been enough. It is because everyone distracted the dragon...and because my good *friend* gave me courage, that I was able to slay the dragon."

Nady had been a bundle of nerves, but she spoke just that part with complete confidence. She also glanced my way when she said "good friend."

"Be that as it may, you alone shot down the dragon. Therefore, you will be specially given the Meteor Medal. This medal was bestowed by the first King Grantz to the best archer in the land. The arrows he shot soared through the sky—like meteors, they say."

"I h-humbly accept...!" Nady responds stiffly. She likely thinks it's too great of an honor for her. I don't know anything about the last person awarded this medal, but the main point is that Nady's skill with the bow was recognized. I'm as delighted as if it was me receiving it.

The formal ceremony ended with bestowing the awards, so we moved to the grand hall originally constructed for receiving international guests. There began a ball unlike anything a commoner like me had any business attending. Most of the attendees are the people who took part in vanquishing the dragons. Approximately *one* person was kicked out at the start for trying to convert people to their cultic religion.

"There's a lot more color and variety to the foods we have now, huh?" I remark as I look around the various dishes placed on the long tables.

It goes without saying that there's an utter lack of meat dishes. According to Lex, things have finally stabilized enough with the domestic farm animals to start breeding. I hope I can force myself to permanently forget that any meat will come from a line of animals that had once been a part of a Boneless Ham.

"All thanks to your invaluable sp—"

"You were saying?"

"All thanks to the blessings brought about by the *special* holy water." Lex instantly yielded to my death glare and corrected

himself. I couldn't care less about maintaining a master-knight relationship, but I do enjoy making use of my superiority in these situations.

"Anyways...Nady is suddenly Miss Popular, huh?" I say to change the topic.

"I can understand why. She was easily the champion of the last quest."

I look to the center of the hall where Nady is surrounded by about twenty soldiers. They all speak to her like excited fans meeting their favorite idol for the first time.

"That last arrow you shot was *astounding*, Lady Nady!"

"I concur. I couldn't take my eyes off it. I know! Would you mind giving me personal archery lessons next time you are free?"

"I want in on that, too!"

"Not fair, guys! I was going to ask *first*. Please teach me, Miss Nady!"

"U-Um, Umm...er..." Nady is overwhelmed by them and who she should answer first. I want to help her out, but the party only just started. The soldiers all want to speak to her, so I will give them some time before I step in unless something requires action on my part sooner.

"You look gloomier than usual, Pino," I say when I spot him out of the corner of my eye.

"I'm not very fond of these events," he says dourly.

"I'm impressed you came anyway."

"I came because something was bothering me."

"...What's that?"

"I didn't account for the possibility of a second dragon. Forgive me," Pino apologizes with his eyes cast down. I'm completely taken by surprise.

"You didn't come all the way here just to say that, did you?"

"...Got a problem with that?" he snips.

"No...I don't. The second dragon was a complete surprise, but no one could have guessed it was there. You have nothing to apologize for. Besides, the whole quest only happened because I pushed for it."

"It became my responsibility when I agreed to help."

"But we pulled it off in the end. We couldn't have defeated one dragon, much less two, without your genius idea to alter the arrowheads and flood the plains. Don't you agree, Lex?"

“Absolutely. This quest was only victorious because of Master Pino’s expert strategies,” Lex concurs.

Is he that prideful or does he just hate being wrong? Either way, Pino’s expression remains dismal. I’m trying to come up with a way to tear down his terribly unhappy look when the greatest weapon appears.

“Big Sister!”

I turn around to see Cia running toward me. Noticing everyone’s judgmental eyes, she slows her gait to a quick walk—it’s not easy to be a young princess. I’m feeling extra guilty about how my tomboy nature is beginning to rub off on her.

“You came too, Cia?”

“Yes. Father instructed me not to make anyone feel uncomfortable.”

None of the nobles or stuffy officials are in attendance at this party, probably to allow the soldiers to truly relax. In fact, a lot of people switched into stiff work mode when Cia showed up. Our surroundings only start to partially lighten up again when Cia announces, “Please enjoy yourselves without paying any mind to me. I am here with friends.”

Cia cutely steps to the side and smiles at Pino standing behind me. “Good evening, Master Pino. Thank you for coming tonight.”

“N-No problem. I had business with Miss Priestess here.” Pino always becomes restless around Cia. She must have caught traces of the displeasure on his face from our prior conversation as she looks questioningly at me.

“Did something happen?” she asks.

“Listen to this, Cia! Pino won’t accept the thanks he’s due. Even though he’s the genius who came up with the strategy that saved my life and won the day,” I say, talking him up.

“As I said, my plan wasn’t a complete success—”

“Is that what this is about?” Cia exclaims over Pino’s frantic objections. She walks up to him and gently takes his right hand in both of hers. “I have also heard just how vital your plan was to the dragon vanquishing quest. Please allow me to thank you personally as Mizuha’s little sister and Grantz Kingdom’s princess. Thank you ever so much, Master Pino...!”

Not even Pino can dismiss Cia’s sincere gratitude. And hey, I thought Pino was opposed to shaking hands with the opposite sex? But he’s letting her hold on tight. Looks like Cia’s the exception to

the rule. He's also turning cherry red to the tips of his ears. My lips spread into a Cheshire smile over the adorable display before me, earning a killer glare from Pino.

"Wh-What's with that dorky face?!"

"Whatever are you talking about, hmm?"

Pino's embarrassment seems to have reached its maximum level. He quickly, yet gently, slips his hand from Cia's and turns his back on her. "I'm done here. I'm going back to work."

"Aw, you are?" Cia asks, disappointment seeping into her voice. "Didn't you only *just* arrive...?"

"Cia wants you to stay longer too. Why don't you enjoy yourself for a bit?"

"Sorry, but my dislike of these events remains unchanged. Besides, someone else needs your meddlesome attention more than me, Miss Priestess," Pino says, quickly taking his leave.

He always just says his part and leaves without a care. Though this time he appears rattled from holding hands with Cia. For once, he looks his age.

Anyway, I wonder who else I'm supposed to be helping. I survey the area and spot Nady surrounded by even more people. Not to mention...

"I wish I had known sooner how delightful Lucor women are."

"I wholeheartedly agree. What endearing ears and tail you have...!"

"Are you currently being courted by anyone, Miss Nady?"

In the time I was talking to Pino and Cia, the other conversation changed from hardcore war talk to more romantic topics. The men are becoming awfully pushy with Nady while trying to outdo each other for her attention. Lex is rendered speechless by it.

"...Lady Nady is a hit with the gentlemen tonight."

"She's beautiful, adorable, and strong. Of course she'd be a hit!" I gush.

"Yes, Miss Nady is a very lovely lady—second to Big Sister," Cia casually throws my name into the mix.

Nady's appearance hasn't changed since the first day she came to the capital, but receiving a medal from the king surely drew attention from people who would've ignored her before. There's nothing wrong with her being popular, and I'm thrilled if everyone far and wide learns of how adorable she is. I, however, am not in

favor of people making her uncomfortable.

“M-Mizuha...” Noticing me, she looks my way with watering eyes. I can’t just sit by watching after she’s sought help.

“Okay, okay. Break it up. If you don’t scatter, I’ll shove my zombie reeking hand in your faces!” I warn with my right hand thrust in front of me. Everyone surrounding Nady flees as if they had just encountered a poisonous spider in their living room. “... Hey, Lex? I know I’m the one who threatened them, but wasn’t it a little *too* effective?”

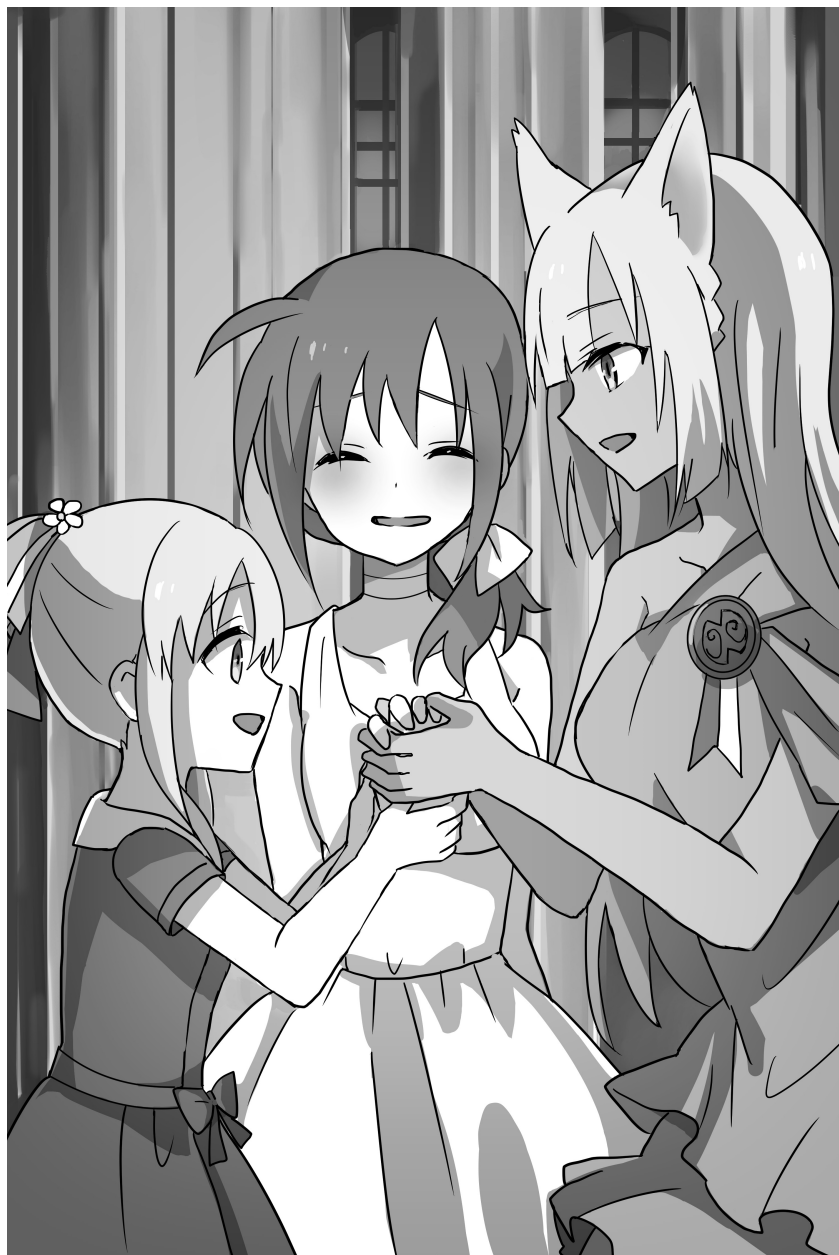
“Most here have experienced the stench for themselves, m’lady.”

“I was only joking... I’m hurt.”

Meh, it doesn’t matter since I rescued Nady. Plus, now I’ve found the ultimate weapon to protect myself from pesky nobles in the future...though using this method will cost me what little dignity I have left.

Nady covers my right hand with both of hers before I fall deeper into depression. “D-Don’t worry! You smell good, Mizuha!”

“This is the warm, gentle hand that saves lives.” Cia places her hands on top of Nady’s.



"My sentiments are the same as Lady Nady's, Lady Mizuha."

"It sounds perverted when you say it, Lex, so I'm just gonna ignore that remark."

"Wh-Why is it only *perverted* when I say it?!"

Of course his compliment makes me happy, but I wish he understood how I feel having that said to me in public by a member of the opposite sex. My insensitive knight can wait. I return my attention to Nady.

"Anyway, I'm sorry for not helping you sooner."

"It's okay. You came when I needed you most." She's so pure and precious. I won't admit out loud that her troubled face was adorable even if someone tried to torture it out of me.

"I'm a bit late, but congratulations on the medal, Nady."

"Thank you. I couldn't have done it without you, Mizuha."

"I didn't do anything. It's all you."

"No, it's because you were with me."

We constantly try to give each other the credit for it and never reach a consensus. It's been like this since we vanquished the dragons. We start laughing because it's become a running joke. At least we found a good middle of the road compromise with "we did it together."

"So that's the medal? Looks kinda...*old*," I note, staring at the medal pinned to Nady's chest. Even my untrained eyes can tell it has been delicately decorated with goldwork embroidery. But the base material has darkened with time, which gives it a less than glamorous impression.

"It was crafted a great many years ago," Cia explains. "Bronze makes up most of the material used." That's a royal for you—they're well-informed about the medals they bestow upon people.

"They should make you something new, but that's a tall order considering the era we live in," I say, shrugging.

"While it is certainly antiquated, the value is far from small. You might even say it has become *more* valuable with time," Cia states proudly.

So it's like an antique that goes up in value with time. I haven't a clue what the value of such an item is in this world, but it's invaluable to me as proof that Nady was recognized by the entire kingdom.

"Though I've got to say, it's *bulky*."

“Yeah, I think it’s too heavy to wear all the time, which is unfortunate.” Nady smiles sadly as she strokes the medal.

“You don’t have to wear it,” Cia interjects. “There is a lot of weight behind being bestowed a medal. If a commoner is awarded one, they rise in rank to a knight.”

“I heard that. But is it really all right for me to be given the rank of knight?” Nady asks.

“I can guarantee it will be essential in protecting Lady Mizuha in the future,” Lex assures her with a smile at almost the same time an irritatingly familiar voice utters my name.

“MiZUha!”

This ball is for everyone who participated in the dragon vanquishing quest. It goes without question that Keith had been there.

I turn around thinking yet another annoying person has shown up, but Keith’s already being apprehended by soldiers.

“Having a title, if only in name, will allow you to remove this kind of flirtatious nobleman from Lady Mizuha’s presence without getting into trouble,” Lex explains coolly as he watches the soldiers restrain Keith. “Apologies, Lord Rowadan, but I request your immediate exit of this venue.”

“You dare intervene in my love *again*, Lex Irvine?! I was about to relive the dramatic and touching moments from the quest with MiZUha! Unhand me! You rotten soldiers!”

I barely spent any time with Keith that’s worth reliving... His delusions grow more outrageous by the day. He struggles and whines as they cart him off. Even the normally passive Cia is exasperated as she frowns and says, “There is no helping that man.

“Ahahaha,” Nady laughs dryly. “Y-You might be right about needing that title.”

It’s a bit questionable that her primary use for it will be anti-Keith, but I’m ecstatic she won’t receive any unjust punishment for dealing with pesky nobles in the future.

“Nady, can we talk?” someone asks in a hard voice after the commotion with Keith is settled. A group of five Lucor men have approached us. They look like they have come to discuss something very serious.

“What’s the matter?” she asks.

“Er...rry...”

“...Come again?”

"I said we're sorry!"

He sounds frustrated, but I can tell he's sincere from the awkward look on his face. After the first young man apologizes, the rest take turns to say their part too.

"Sorry for calling you worthless and talentless."

"And for constantly saying you get special treatment for being the Chieftain's daughter."

"Also for calling you a giant, bigfoot, beanstalk...and the like."

"O-Oh, that stuff. It doesn't bother me," Nady says dismissively.

"How could it not? Don't dismiss it—"

"Because it's the truth," she crisply responds, her brows furrowed. She's so different from the depressed girl they knew, the Lucor men blink repeatedly as if they've got the wrong person. "You weren't wrong to dub me as powerless among our people. I'm still lacking."

"Yeah, but you took down the dragon our arrows couldn't even reach!"

"Even so, I couldn't have done it alone. Mizuha gave me the courage to release that arrow, and it only hit its mark because everyone distracted the dragon. Which reminds me, I never thanked you for that." Nady smiles softly. "Thank you."

The Lucor men are blindsided by her dazzling smile. Some even blush.

"You've changed."

"I have?"

"Yeah, you have. I don't know how to describe it...it's like you've gotten...better?"

"...Hm? That's good, I guess?" Nady's smile remains as she cutely tilts her head. The Lucor men visibly avert their eyes from her.

I wonder if this is a case of boys picking on a girl because they like her. I'm not sure if that same logic applies to nonhumans in another world, but...it certainly seems like it to me. I thought they were all pigs who enjoyed badmouthing Nady, but they're kind of cute like this. Strange.

"A-Anyway, that's all we wanted to say. Later."

The Lucor men scurry away with that curt farewell. Though Nady was confused by their awkward interaction from beginning to end, her expression is soft, likely because they confronted her in a

respectful way.

“Sorry about that, Mizuha. I just made you witness a strange moment among my people.”

“I don’t mind. More than that, it’s great that people aside from your father have come to accept you.”

“Yeah! Maybe now I can proudly proclaim that I’m your bodyguard,” Nady exclaims, her whole face lighting up. She sounds so gung-ho about becoming my bodyguard, but I’m still hung up on that fact.

“Are you really sure you want to become my bodyguard? Aren’t the rest of the Lucors returning to your village soon? Don’t you want to go with them?”

“I already made up my mind. Besides, I realized during the fight against the dragon that I have mastered the bow to protect *you*, Mizuha.”

“Nady...”

“I’ve already spoken about it with Father...and I told Mother.” Nady returned to her village the other day. I thought she went to inform her mother ahead of time about being awarded the medal, but it sounds like that wasn’t the only reason.

Cia steps forward after hearing Nady’s resolve. “I’m also ecstatic that Miss Nady will be staying with us.”

“I will do my best to protect Mizuha, so I hope we can continue to get along well in the future, Princess Cia.”

“As do I. However, hearing you call me princess feels too stiff and formal for my liking. Please call me Cia.”

“I couldn’t! It is too impolite...” Nady is flustered by Cia’s request. I understand how she feels. After all, she’s addressing Grantz’s crown princess. She shouldn’t even be able to converse with her under normal circumstances.

“Does that mean I’m being rude for blatantly calling her Cia?” I tease.

“You’re special, Mizuha! You’re the Holy Priestess!”

“I think friends can put things like titles and status behind them. Just like how you got to the point of calling me by *name*,” I say with a wicked grin after using myself as an example.

I’m supposedly a respected figure with the title of “Priestess,” and Nady still became my friend. The same should hold true with Cia. I don’t know if my encouragement gave her the push she needed or not, but Nady takes a deep breath and formally faces Cia.

“O-Okay, C-Cia.”

“Thank you, Nady!”

“It is very reassuring to be able to fight alongside you, Lady Nady,” Lex says, pounding his right fist against his chest.

“I hope you will guide me as I am still lacking, Sir Lex.”

“Leave it to me. I, Lex Irvine, will devote myself as Lady Mizuha’s knight to teaching you everything I know.”

There’s no question that Lex is an exceptionally skilled warrior. But he’s almost too enthusiastic—it scares me.

“Lex isn’t very flexible when it comes to certain things, so try not to pick that part of his personality up,” I whisper in Nady’s ear.

“O-Oh? O-Okay,” Nady hesitantly agrees.

“L-Lady Mizuha?” Lex sends me a questioning look because we’re whispering in front of him.

“Just having some girl talk,” I respond with an innocent smile.

“Setting everything else aside, I look forward to putting our strength together to protect Lady Mizuha!”

“M-Me too!”

We still have a long ways to go before Cladorca is completely purified. After that’s finished, we are going to have to negotiate with them to prevent any possible skirmishes in the future. Once that happens, we will need to be more vigilant about non-zombie related threats.

But I should be able to get past any obstacle with Lex and Nady at my side.

“It’s not nice of you to leave me out of the loop, Boss Man,” Rosso chimes in as if he has been waiting to talk to us all this time.

“You were here, Sir Rosso?”

“Th-That’s cold, Boss Man! I took part in the dragon vanquishing quest too!”

“Ah, sorry, I didn’t notice you there either.”

“Not you too, Boss Lady! Grr... Retreating to the corner of the hall to avoid standing out worked against me...”

You definitely don’t see many commoners attending castle balls. I understand why he was trying to blend into the walls. I would have happily become a wallflower with him if I wasn’t the Priestess.

“B-Back to the point! Please call me if anything comes up. I will always put my life on the line for my favorite Boss Lady!”

“Thanks. I’m counting on you when the time comes.”

In fact, Rosso helped a ton during the dragon quest, especially when we were cornered by miner zombies in the tunnels. If not for his quick thinking and agility, we wouldn't be having this party right now. He's really changed his scummy first impression to becoming one of the people I can depend on the most in this world.

"Iris is here too."

Iris pops her head out from under the table when I'm trying to figure out where her voice came from.

"Geh!" I scream and jump back on a reflex. "Why are you crawling under the tables like a zombie?! And I thought they threw you out."

"I slipped free and made it back here."

Iris flashes a triumphant grin. She's cuddling a statue shaped like me. It should've been lost when she chucked it in the dragon's mouth, but...it looks like she had a spare. What's more ridiculous is that this one looks even more like me than the last, with creases carved into what's now a flowing skirt. I've been thinking this for a long time, but the fanatics who worship me would definitely be happier if they become sculptors instead.

"...You didn't hit the soldiers with that, did you?"

"I-I did no such thing."

"...I find it hard to believe you."

"I only hit *zombies* with this."

"I keep telling you to stop it because it's dangerous to hit anyone with that—living or dead."

"My goddess is extra precious when she's worrying about Iris..."

She completely misunderstood that it's the zombies being whacked by her superhuman strength that I'm worried about. It's no use setting her straight now that she's gone into another one of her ecstasy trips with a dopey smile.

Exasperated, I sigh. I can hear Nady giggling beside me.

"What's so funny, Nady?"

"Sorry. It's just so much fun for some reason. I have never been surrounded by so much energy and excitement before."

Both Iris and Rosso are energetic people. Throw Keith, who was already dragged off, into the mix and I'd say things get more chaotic than exciting. Nady might feel the excitement more than I do because she spent most of her life alone in her village.

"You have to get used to it. It is always like this around Lady

Mizuha.”

“C’mon, Lex, you make it sound like I’m causing this mood!”

“Am I wrong, m’lady?”

He actually thinks I’m the cause.

“Indeed. This is one time I must agree wholly with Lex. Everyone near Big Sis is always smiling and laughing!”

“Ack. You think so too, Cia?”

I didn’t expect Cia to side with Lex. That said, I’d rather people be smiling than frowning around me. It does worry me that most of the people I’m surrounded by are a bit—or rather—quite unique in their own way. Something about our conversation seems to have been funny enough to make Nady laugh again.

“I have mixed feelings about this, but meh. If Nady’s enjoying herself, it’s all good.”

“I love it. I really enjoy the energy you bring into a room, Mizuha.”

I currently enjoy a high status because I’m the Priestess, but once I lose Goddess Sadia’s powers, I’ll be no different from any other high school girl. There’s nothing special about me. But...I couldn’t ask for a greater power than the ability to make those I care about smile and laugh.

Things are really only just getting serious after I finish purifying Cladorca. I have to take preemptive action to stop wars from breaking out between humans. That will surely require not only the powers I obtained from the Goddess but also my own power. I can imagine how crazy difficult things will become. But I have a lot of people on my side and my amazing friends too!

Surrounded by the din of the hyped-up party, I flash Nady my best fighting smile.

“I can’t wait to see what the future has in store for us, Nady!”

“Me too, Mizuha!”

The End

Afterword

HELLO after so long! Haru Yayari here. I never thought I would have the opportunity to greet you all like this again...but that doesn't make sense without a behind-the-scenes explanation, does it?

Here's a little secret: I actually wrote *Another World's Zombie Apocalypse Is Not My Problem!* as a casual one-shot. Now, don't get me wrong: it wasn't casual in the sense of no planning. Rather, it was a work of love that I had a lot of fun adding all my favorite themes into.

Truth be told, I was satisfied just tying up the story in one volume. I was also content to let the English version by Cross Infinite World end at that. So what changed? There was such an outpouring of love and praise for that one volume, we decided to continue the story.

So it was a big surprise to continue Mizuha's story as a series, but fortunately, I hadn't covered absolutely *everything* about her journey in volume 1. Maybe I had always secretly wanted to explore this world more. In any case, thanks to that, I was able to flesh out the characters I enjoyed so much in the form of a sequel, and for that, I'd like to commend my past self for leaving the story open!

You might have already guessed it by now, but volume 2 was entirely written for this publication and not just something I did in my spare time. I wrote this volume hoping to bring more enjoyment to everyone overseas who loved it so much.

The main highlight of this volume has to be a certain flying menace (purposely not mentioning what it is here in case you choose to read from the afterword!). One of the main appeals of this story is that while it is a zombie series, it takes place in a fantasy world, so I made the most of both genres in this volume. I just know if I ever ended up face to face with Mizuha, she would shove her reeking hand in my face for it!

I do feel a *little* concerned that the story might have taken too

serious of a turn...but hopefully, the boisterous cast kept it from getting too depressing for you.

All in all, I enjoyed every second of volume 2 as I had with volume 1. I would be thrilled if you felt the same!

Now then, I could go on forever, but I might bore you so let me just finish this off with a farewell greeting. I want to thank everyone involved in sending this work out into the world. And my greatest thanks go to everyone who has continued to love this series since volume 1.

I hope your days are full of laughter and joy. May we meet somewhere again!



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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